



The Influence of School Leadership on Change Adoption and Sustainability: A Systematic Literature Review

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21413051

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Abstract

This systematic literature review (SLR) explored the role of school leadership in educational change adoption and sustainability through the synthesis of 42 reviews and empirical syntheses published between 2015 and 2025. In accordance with PRISMA 2020, the studies were chosen in various regions and within school settings, and the leadership models used in the studies included instructional, transformational, distributed, and sustainable leadership. Thematic analysis revealed 4 meta-themes, including: (1) context-responsive leadership facilitating reform adoption, (2) capacity building and professional learning supporting sustainability, (3) distributed and transformational leadership as mechanisms between adoption and sustainment and (4) adaptive and systemic leadership to align reforms in the long-term. Results show that relational, systemic, and proactive leadership practices, such as shared decision-making, stakeholder engagement, data-driven monitoring, and fit to the local and policy contexts, are associated with leadership effectiveness. Among possible limitations are language bias because of publications in English, use of short-term empirical evidence, and diversity of reform types and leadership models. To practice, the findings highlight the creation of distributed leadership frameworks, entrench continuous professional learning, and confronting institutional constraints, as well as harmonizing reforms and realities on the ground. The paper finds a significant and multi-faceted impact of school leadership on both adoption and maintenance of educational reforms, which makes the need to further research decades of reforms long term, multi-level, and standardized research in order to make reforms persistent.

Keywords: *school leadership, educational change, reform adoption, sustainability, systematic literature review, PRISMA*

Introduction

The educational system worldwide is under urgent pressure to implement and maintain reforms that enhance teaching and learning - whether that be re-aligning the curriculum or raising-scale pedagogical initiatives, and whole-school betterment initiatives (Borazon & Chuang, 2023; Sengsoulintha, 2025). However, most of the initiatives are tentatively implemented, however, few of them become the permanent elements of practice (i.e. sustained at scale) (Aldridge and McLure, 2024; McLure and Aldridge, 2023). The role of school leadership (in particular, practices of principals and leadership teams) is repeatedly cited in the literature as a key factor in either the adoption of change (the introduction of a reform into the school practice) or its sustainability (making it embedded, routinized, and permanent over time). Nonetheless, it has been suggested that the conceptualization and measurement of leadership are quite heterogeneous, and gaps in longitudinal evidence on the connection between particular leadership practices and long-term outcomes are still persistent (Hitt and Tucker, 2016; Schott, van Roekel, and Tummers, 2020; Pont, 2020).

In principle, the conceptual definition of leadership in schools is characterized in various and even overlapping ways. Instructional leadership predicts the attention of leaders to curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher professional learning; it emphasizes the following actions: the establishment of a consistent instructional vision, modeling instruction, and teacher development (Hitt and Tucker, 2016). Distributed or teacher leadership emphasizes the diffusion of leadership among staff and considers leadership to be a shared work that has the potential to develop ownership and change capacity (Schott et al., 2020; Mifsud, 2024). More recently, scholars have also used a sustainable leadership lens to education - focusing on the leadership systems and practices that lead to the creation of enduring organizational capacity, stewardship, and future-orientation (Al-Khamaiseh, Bailey, and Jarvis, 2024; Daniels, Hondeghe, and Dochy, 2019). These typologies do not exclude each other, the most effective methods of adoption and sustainability promotion, according to modern reviews, are those that combine instructional focus with distributed capacity building and organizational systems thinking (Hitt and Tucker, 2016; Pont, 2020).



Implementation science should be used to complement the vocabulary offering a sense of clarity in the way the innovations are adopted, executed, expanded, and sustained within systems. Proctor et al. (2011) define adoption as the first act of the process of using a new intervention or program and fidelity (or implementation quality) as the extent to which a program is applied in accordance to how the developers of the program designed it. These are the concepts that are necessary to evaluate whether an innovation is enforced as planned or successful. Additionally, Aarons et al. (2017) remember about scale-up or scale-out, i.e. the expansion of an evidence-based intervention that was originally implemented in pilot contexts to new populations or systems. Lastly, the sustainment concept involves a long-term sustainability of practices and benefits in the long run so that the introduced innovations can yield positive results even after the implementation phase (Proctor et al., 2011). As a set, these constructs, namely adoption, fidelity, scale-up and sustainment are the important dimensions to assess the success and permanence of the program implementation in different areas including education and public service. Scattered reviews in the fields such as education, public health, and early childhood interventions demonstrate the same recurrent patterns: the existence of leadership that (a) raises articulate goals and priorities, (b) obtains practical supports (time, resources, and data systems) and (c) fosters staff ownership through distributed leadership and sustained professional development improves the chances of initial adoption and continuation beyond pilot phases (Cassar et al., 2019; Gelman et al., 2023; McLure, 2023). Sectoral reviews (e.g., school-based physical activity, early childhood programs) are especially beneficial since they depict the implementation mechanisms (use of explicit frameworks, monitoring systems, local adaptation), which can be crossed across types of reforms (Cassar et al., 2019; Gelman et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, key moderators play a role in the power of leadership. The ability of schools to adopt reforms and maintain them can be boosted or limited by national and system-level policies accountability pressure, resourcing models, and principal autonomy (Pont, 2020). School-level contextual variables such as the turnover of school staff, school infrastructure, and community involvement also interact with leadership practices to influence outcomes (Aldridge and McLure, 2024). Most importantly, various reviews also note the problems with the definitions and methodological tools: variable operationalizations of sustainability, preponderance of cross-sectional or short-term studies, and paucity of long-term causal evidence on the influence of leadership (Schott et al., 2020; McLure, 2023). These constraints render it hard to provide specific prescriptions concerning the behaviors of leaders that will consistently lead to long-term sustainment cross-contexts.

It is based on these gaps that the current systematic literature review is narrowed down to the question of how school leadership may lead to the implementation and sustainability of educational reforms. To provide the answer to the main question, I produce high-quality reviews of articles published since 2015 and 2025: Which leadership practices and organizational arrangements most reliably contribute to the implementation and maintenance of school reforms, and when? The synthesis is directed by secondary questions: (1) What frameworks of implementation and monitoring systems are linked to better sustainment? (2) What role does a distributed leadership and leadership development strategies play in entrenching reforms? (3) What are the methodological weaknesses of the current review literature that restrict causal and generalizability inferences?

This review will be in the form of a review-of-reviews (i.e., synthesizing systematic and narrative reviews), that enables the author to balance evidence on various types of reforms and geographic areas and attentive to cross-sector lessons in the public health and early childhood literature (Cassar et al., 2019; Gelman et al., 2023). Through the synthesis of this secondary literature, the author is hoping to define where the agreement is (e.g., the significance of instructional leadership bundles, the purpose of monitoring in sustainment) and where the evidence is not so clear (e.g., the precise process through which distributed leadership works to promote long-term change). The following is the structure of the manuscript: Methods (eligibility, search and synthesis procedures), Results (characteristics of included reviews and thematic synthesis), Discussion (interpretation, implications and future research priorities), Limitations and Conclusion. According to the recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews, instructional leadership bundles and systematic monitoring practices continually promote the sustainability of instructional change (Richardson and Khawaja, 2025; Karakose, Ozdogru, and Malkoc, 2024). However, the data on the effectiveness of distributed leadership mechanisms over time, in particular, in terms of maintaining change, are still inconclusive, with some research indicating mediating relationships through teacher efficacy or collective leadership but reporting inconsistency in results across settings (Richardson and Khawaja, 2025; Tao, Kamarudin, and Abdul Kadir, 2025).

Literature Review

Essentially, reformulation of education across the whole world has been characterized by the necessity of robust and receptive leadership in schools that will help in not only accepting changes but also living long (Donoso, Alarcon, and Gonzalez, 2023; Zadok and Benoliel, 2024). Educational change, which can be brought by curriculum change or inclusive education policy, the incorporation of digital learning, and pedagogical innovation, is often met with resistance, inconsistency, and inconsistent adoption (Fullan, 2025; Harris, 2018). As a result, leadership becomes



one of the primary agents of dealing with this complexity, policy to practice, and creating an organizational environment that supports long-term improvement (Leithwood et al., 2020; Norqvist and Leffler, 2017).

The Leadership in Change in Education.

The studies have consistently shown that leadership ranks second in terms of school-related variables that can affect learning among students after classroom instructions (Leithwood et al., 2020). School leaders who are effective establish a clear vision, combine resources, develop teacher capacity, and keep attention on the quality of instructions all of which make it easier to implement reforms successfully (Hallinger, 2018). The increasing body of empirical and review literature indicates that instructional and transformational practices of leadership have a powerful impact on the motivation of teachers and their commitment to change (Hitt and Tucker, 2016). Transformational leaders especially motivate teachers to internalize the reform objectives, and the instructional leadership gives practical advice, feedback, and professional growth in line with change initiatives (Day et al., 2016; Hitt and Tucker, 2016).

Nevertheless, the long-term sustainability of these reforms is based on the leadership that extends beyond charisma and vision. An example of such leadership is distributed leadership, which promotes a sense of collective responsibility and decision-making, making teachers and other staff members able to play a role in the reform process and not rely on a single leader (Mifsud, 2024; Harris, 2019). Systematic reviews indicate that distributed leadership is associated with increased collective efficacy, teacher learning communities, and shared ownership culture, which is required to maintain change (Schott et al., 2020).

Systemic Change and Sustainability.

Adoption is the term that can be applied to the initial adoption of new practices, whereas sustainability is the term that is connected with the long-term institutionalization and incorporation of reforms into the school culture, policies, and everyday practices (McLure, 2023). The continual implementation of reform is a matter of leadership and commitment, systems thinking, long-term planning, and capacity building (Fullan, 2025; Al-Khamaiseh et al., 2024). The sustainability frameworks of leadership claim that the constant learning, decentralization of responsibility and moral purpose play a crucial role in maintaining the momentum of reform even when leadership changes (Al-Khamaiseh et al., 2024).

The results of the literature review confirm the argument that leadership development programs can significantly enhance implementation fidelity and maintain the school improvement outcomes. Research has established that national and institutional changes that address the issue of leadership capacity, i.e. organized mentoring, coaching, and shared learning among professionals have more consistent uptake and more lasting positive impacts on school practice. An example can be seen in Merle et al. (2022), who discovered that training and consultation strategies based on motivation increased adoption and fidelity of universal school programs by teachers over time with a focus on ongoing professional support. Furthermore, Norman et al. (2021) have noted that coaching and leadership fellowship programs have contributed to the important effect on mentor competencies and leadership behaviors, which indicates that the application of specific development interventions may result in sustainable organizational change. Taken as a whole, these results show that leadership development programs are critical processes that guarantee high-quality implementation and long-lasting educational reform results. Additionally, Pont (2020) discovered that national reforms which focused on leadership development programs, which includes mentoring, coaching, and collaborative professional learning resulted in the high implementation fidelity and sustained school improvement results. Furthermore, Aldridge and McLure (2024) observed that leaders who gave teachers professional autonomy and psychological safety could more easily maintain the innovation after the pilot phase.

Issues of Change Adoption and Sustainability.

Although leadership plays a very vital role, not all reforms succeed because of structural and contextual factors. The consistent implementation is frequently hampered by the resource constraints, the staff turnover, the change in the policies, and the insufficient professional development (Daniels et al., 2019; Pont, 2020). In addition, the analysis has shown that a significant number of reforms do not include clear sustainability planning; the leaders tend to be preoccupied with the compliance in the short term instead of capacity building in the long term (McLure, 2023; Harris, 2018). These issues highlight why the study of leadership should be considered not as an independent variable but as a complex and adaptive system that is contingent on culture, policy, and the socio-economic context (Aldridge and McLure, 2024).

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations.



The paper has been informed by the theory of educational change that was authored by Fullan (2025), according to which the development of an effective reform process must involve the establishment of coherence, the development of capacity, and the sense of the moral purpose. When it comes to the sustainability of change, the ability of the system to institutionalize new practices beyond the initial implementation stage may prevent change. Once again, as stated by Fixsen, Van Dyke, and Blase (2024), most education systems are spending a lot of money on bringing in the reforms but very few systems are paying much attention to the science of how the reforms can be implemented and sustained. Their contribution claims that implementation science as an academic field is still underdeveloped, especially in the education sector, and that long-term change demands organized changes over time, feedback loops, and bridging research and practice leadership. Moreover, Norqvist and Leffler (2017) point out that learning and change do not have a purely formal education mode. The analysis of non-formal learning environments they conducted showed that democratic participation and learner agency played a key role in the success and sustainability of new practice. This learning contributes to the notion that participatory cultures should be promoted by the effective leadership of schools through the active involvement of teachers, students, and communities in the process of reforms. By so doing, a sustainable education change goes beyond compliance - it becomes a collective, democratic process. In addition, Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) challenge the belief that leadership should be distributed automatically and presumed to have positive outcomes. Their analysis demonstrates that successful distributed leadership involves well laid structures, mutual trust, and professional learning communities where leadership is not adopted informally. It is this school of thought that necessitates school systems to create leadership models that are less autocratic and more accountable so that distributed leadership does not divide the organization into small parts instead of being part of the change. This model is consistent with the Philippine experience, as curriculum changes like the K-12 and MATATAG curriculum highlights the similar challenge: school leaders need to balance pedagogical and organizational change and at the same time provide inclusivity and equity (Kilag et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important to investigate the role of school leadership in change adoption and maintenance in determining how educational changes can be institutionalized successfully in schools. Moreover, sustainable leadership theory (Al-Khamaiseh et al., 2024) is a moral and systemic perspective that is characterized by seven principles, including depth, length, breadth, justice, diversity, resourcefulness, and conservation, which are quite consistent with the objectives of educational sustainability.

The models highlight that leadership has to be more situational, participative, and dynamic. The power of leadership is not limited to initiating reform but to instilling new standards, keeping collective efficacy, and a continuous learning adaptive process in schools (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Rationale for the Present Review

Despite the large number of studies and reviews done related to leadership and school improvement, very little synthesis has been done on how leadership in schools affects the adoption and sustainability of change in school contexts. In the case of previous reviews, there was a tendency to consider a single dimension, including leadership styles (Hitt and Tucker, 2016) or distributed practices (Mifsud, 2024) without synthesizing the results regarding the longitudinal effects on the sustainability of reforms. The current systematic literature review fills this gap by synthesizing recent evidence (2015-2025) in order to find the patterns, contextual factors, and leadership mechanisms that contribute to the successful uptake, as well as the maintenance, of educational change. The purpose of this review is to inform policy and practice- helping educational leaders, policymakers and researchers to gain awareness of which leadership strategies best sustain meaningful systemic improvement in the long term.

Past Reviews

This part reviews and overviews existing body of literature (published between 2015 and 2025) in order to offer an even more profound insight into how the leadership in schools could influence the educational change process, adoption of reforms, and sustainability in various settings. Putting together, these analyses indicate that leadership is not a fixed administrative role but a relationship, dynamic, and contextually sensitive practice that has a significant impact on the sustainability and effectiveness of reform initiatives.

Table 1. Analysis of recent reviews of literature of reform efforts in a single country

Review	Country / Scope	Timeframe covered (primary studies)	Key findings relevant to present study	Relevant areas identified for further work
McLure, F. I. (2023). <i>Sustaining reform implementation:</i>	Australia-based authors; global evidence synthesis with	Primary studies 2000–2020	Identifies 8 actionable themes influencing long-term success of reform	Calls for longitudinal national studies that directly link leadership



<i>a systematic literature review.</i>	national examples		implementation; leadership emerges as a recurrent enabler but moderated by policy, resourcing, and local capacity.	practices to sustainability outcomes.
Aldridge, J. M., & McLure, F. I. (2024). <i>Preparing schools for educational change: Barriers and supports.</i>	Global synthesis but draws heavily on case evidence from national reforms (examples from Australia/UK/OEC D contexts)	Primary studies 2000–2020	Leadership practices that build a "reform-ready" school climate, planning, and capacity-building are central to implementation; national policy coherence affects school-level adoption.	Recommends national-level policy analyses and country case studies to test interaction between policy levers and school leadership.
Observation	-	-	Few of recent high-quality reviews focus solely on a single country's reforms; instead many reviews synthesize cross-national evidence and present country examples.	More country-specific syntheses would help translate general leadership lessons into policy-sensitive guidance for national systems.

The evidence of the review demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is rooted in cultural, political and system contexts. The policy review of school leadership reforms, established national-level determinants, including autonomy, accountability models, and decentralization, to have a strong influence on the adoption of reforms in terms of leadership. Likewise, in their systematic review of the sustainability of reform, McLure and Aldridge (2023) identified shared leadership, continuous professional learning, engagement of stakeholders, and stability of school staffing as some of the most important facilitators of sustained change. These results indicate three problematic themes:

- ✓ Context sensitivity - strategy in leadership should be in line with local conditions and culture of the system;
- ✓ Collaborative empowerment -significant involvement of teachers and stakeholders helps with adoption and institutionalization;
- ✓ Capacity and continuity - structures of professional learning and resourcing, as opposed to actions on the part of leaders, contribute to long-term sustainability.

These themes offer a basis of seeing how leadership is related to not only the uptake but perseverance of reforms both in systems of education that are experiencing a large-scale change.

Table 2. Analysis of recent reviews related to a particular initiative / reform type

Review	Initiative / Reform type	Scope / Databases searched	Key findings relevant to present study	Relevant areas for further work
Cassar, S., Salmon, J., Timperio, A., Naylor, P.-J., van Nassau, F., Contardo Ayala, A. M., & Koorts, H. (2019).	School-based physical activity & sedentary behaviour interventions (implementation & sustainability)	Systematic review; many databases; real-world settings	Use of implementation frameworks, leadership engagement, and local adaptation strongly associated with adoption and sustainment; absence of monitoring/fidelity	Research how leadership functions in health/PA interventions translate to academic reforms (e.g., curriculum) - cross-sector transferability.



			data undermined sustainability.	
Gelman, R., et al. (2023).	Early childhood interventions (adoption & sustainability)	Systematic reviews across public health & education literature	Highlights importance of leadership and governance to sustain interventions beyond pilot funding.	Comparative study of leadership roles sustaining early years vs. K-12 reforms.
Schott, C., van Roekel, H., & Tummers, L. G. (2020).	Teacher leadership - conceptual and empirical review (relevance for distributed leadership in implementation)	Systematic review of teacher leadership literature	Teacher leadership (when enabled by principals) supports diffusion and normalization of innovations — a mechanism for sustainability.	Need to link teacher-leadership processes to long-term institutionalization of reforms.
Daniëls, E., Hondeghem, A., & Dochy, F. (2019).	Leadership and leadership development in educational settings	Literature review; multiple databases	Leadership development is crucial for sustained reform leadership capacity; context-sensitive professional development needed.	Evaluate which leadership development models best support sustainment of reforms in diverse school systems.

The reviews on specific leadership frameworks/type of reforms provide a precise detail on how leadership practices facilitate change in practice. As one example, Mifsud (2023) made a systematized review of the research on distributed leadership (2010-2022) and discovered that distributed leadership is now more researched, but its capacity to maintain reforms over time is not theorized. The review demonstrates that the adoption and capacity building can be promoted using the models of shared responsibility between teachers and leaders, and their sustainability in the post-pilot stages is possible with more intense conceptualization and measurement. The second paper is a review by McLure and Aldridge (2023) that indicates that sustainable reform can be defined by continuous professional education, data tracking, resource alignment, and collective leadership practices. Collectively, these reviews demonstrate that change cannot be a one-time event and thus it is an ongoing adaptive process: leadership has to institutionalize learning systems, enhance a sense of shared accountability, and foster organizational resilience.

Integrative Insights and Theoretical Implications.

The synthesis of the results of adoption-oriented and sustainability-oriented reviews demonstrates a theoretical course: sustainable change leadership is relational, systemic, and capacity-focused. Instead of viewing sustainability as the extension of a program, the present conceptualization regards it as the capacity of the school to learn, adapt, and enhance as the years go by (McLure & Aldridge, 2023). The traditional leader models based on hierarchy are becoming inferior; collaborative and distributed leadership models are becoming more effective to reinforce reform (Mifsud, 2023). Nevertheless, the review literature has a number of gaps:

- ✓ Limited reviews which have connected leadership practices with longitudinal outcome data that demonstrate actual sustainment after 2-3 years.
- ✓ Little attention paid to district or system-level leadership and its interactions with school leadership.
- ✓ Curriculum A demand to better bring together leadership styles (instructional, transformational, distributed) into sustainability frameworks.

Connotations of Past Reviews to the Current Study.

The analyzed literature testifies that the role of school leadership in achieving change adoption and sustainability is not just a matter of administrative effectiveness. It goes about the development of cultures of learning, the development of agency among teachers, and the development of vision and practice. This understanding informs the conceptual background of the current review because it highlights leadership as a multi-dimensional process involving vision, collaboration, contextual adaptation, and continuous learning. The considerations of this similarity



of global and national review evidence help in highlighting the significance of context-based research - particularly in an environment where curriculum changes such as MATATAG initiative are being implemented. This evidence base is therefore aimed at being expanded by the current research that intends to examine how leadership practices affect adoption and sustainability of reforms in various school settings over the long term.

Methods

Research Design

The research utilized a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) study approach based on the Preferred Reporting Items of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guideline. The PRISMA model is a well-organized and clear model of detecting, filtering, and synthesizing evidence of the existing studies to guarantee methodological rigor and reproducibility. This model increases the quality and openness of the review procedures as it helps the researchers to provide records of all the steps of the evidence synthesis, including inclusion criteria and data extraction and analysis (Page et al., 2021). The review aimed to review peer-reviewed articles published in the years 2015 to 2025 that explored the nature of school leadership on adoption and sustainability of educational change. It was not just aimed at summarizing findings, but also finding thematic trends, conceptual gaps and theoretical implications that inform leadership practice and policy in the context of educational change.

Eligibility Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were set with the aim of having methodological consistency and focus. The selection was based on Population-Concept-Context (PCC) framework as the framework of qualitative and mixed-method reviews (Pollock et al., 2023). The PCC framework assists in clarifying and matching the purpose of the review by including the clarification of who is under study (Population), what under investigation (Concept), the circumstances or settings of interest (Context) and thus provides clarity in the review process (Aromataris et al., 2024). These were the criteria that allowed the synthesis of empirically based and methodologically sound studies in the review.

Table 3. Inclusion and Exclusion criteria used to guide selection of articles for analysis

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication period	2015–2025	Before 2015
Type of literature	Peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and empirical studies on school leadership and educational reform	Books, editorials, dissertations, opinion pieces
Conceptual focus	Studies examining leadership influence on educational change, reform adoption, or sustainability	Studies focusing solely on student outcomes without leadership context
Context	Primary and secondary school settings, including special education contexts	Higher education or vocational institutions
Language	English	Non-English sources without available translation
Access	Full-text accessible via academic databases	Abstract-only sources

Search Strategy

The following scholarly databases were searched comprehensively and include Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Sage journals, Taylor and Francis Online, SpringerLink, and Google scholar. The use of several databases is in line with the good practices of systematic review methodology, which implies overall coverage and reduces the publication bias by identifying published and old literature (Page et al., 2021). Variations in the terminology were captured with the help of Boolean operators ("AND," "OR") and truncations. The primary search query consisted of: AND (school leadership" OR educational leadership" OR principal leadership" OR instructional leadership" OR distributed leadership" OR transformational leadership) AND ("educational change" OR "reform adoption" OR "curriculum change" OR "implementation of innovations" OR "sustainability" OR "school improvement"). All the retrieved records were exported to Zotero and citation managed and duplicates were eliminated before the process of screening them.



Data Screening and Extraction

The selection process of the review is a four-phase PRISMA process that entailed identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. One thousand two hundred and sixty-three (1,263) records were first detected in databases.

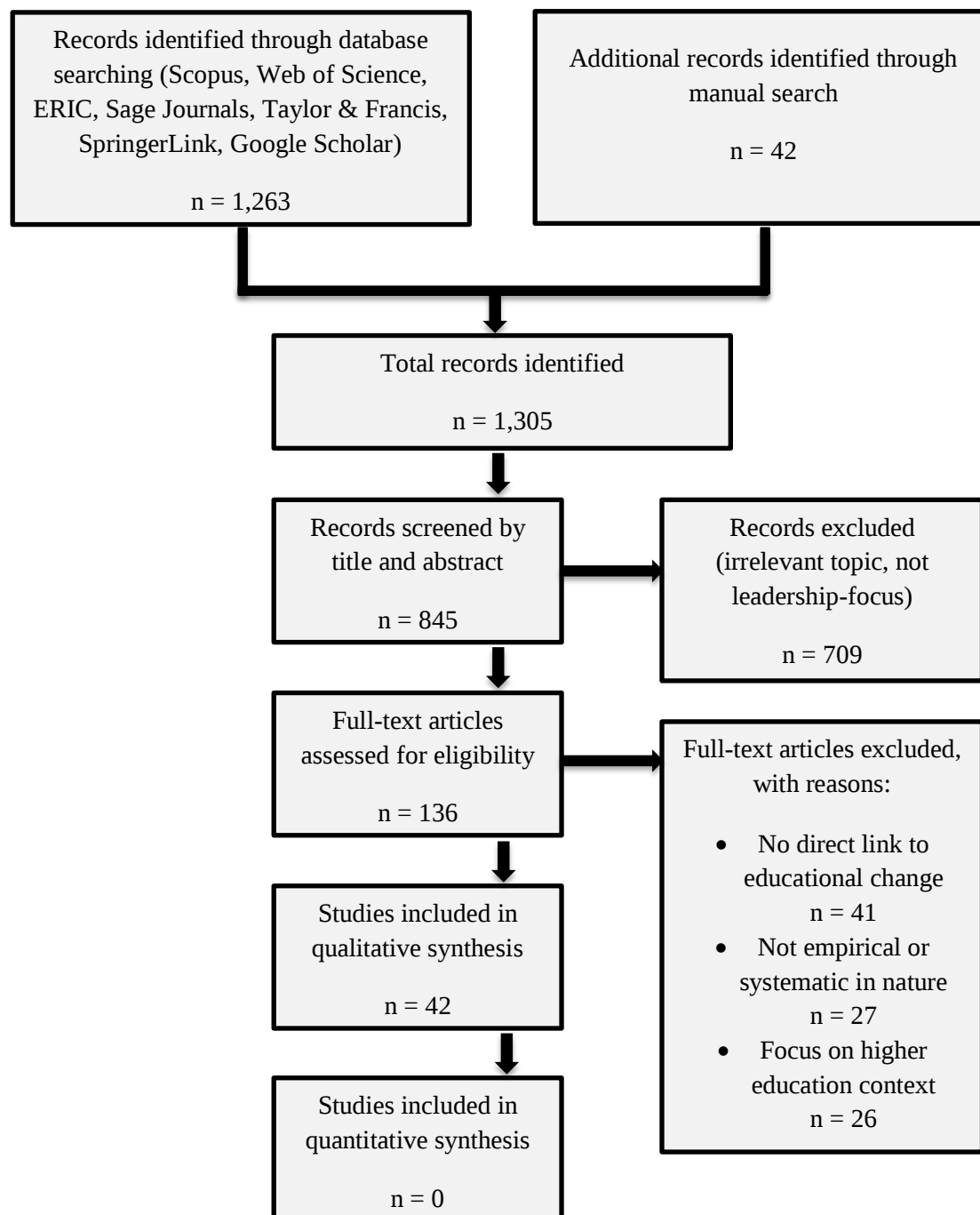


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

The eight hundred forty-five (845) studies were screened with title and abstract screening after eliminating four hundred eighteen (418) duplicates and one hundred thirty-six (136) studies were retained to undergo full-text review. In the end, only forty-two (42) studies were eligible to include in the research and were evaluated qualitatively. This systematic methodology is in line with the PRISMA 2020, which offers a standard and clear way of



reporting the flow of the studies in the framework of a systematic review (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA procedure was associated with a high level of transparency in recording inclusion decisions and offered a path to be repeated by future meta-analyses. Thematic synthesis approach by Thomas and Harden (2008) was used to guide data extraction that assists in the formation of analytical themes based on qualitative evidence. The extracted data included:

- ✓ Name of author/ authors, date and region/country.
- ✓ Aims and theoretical framework of research.
- ✓ Type of leadership (e.g., transformational, distributed, instructional, adaptive)
- ✓ Design and setting of study (e.g., primary, secondary, national reform initiative).
- ✓ The most important findings associated with change adoption and sustainability.

The Origin of the Study

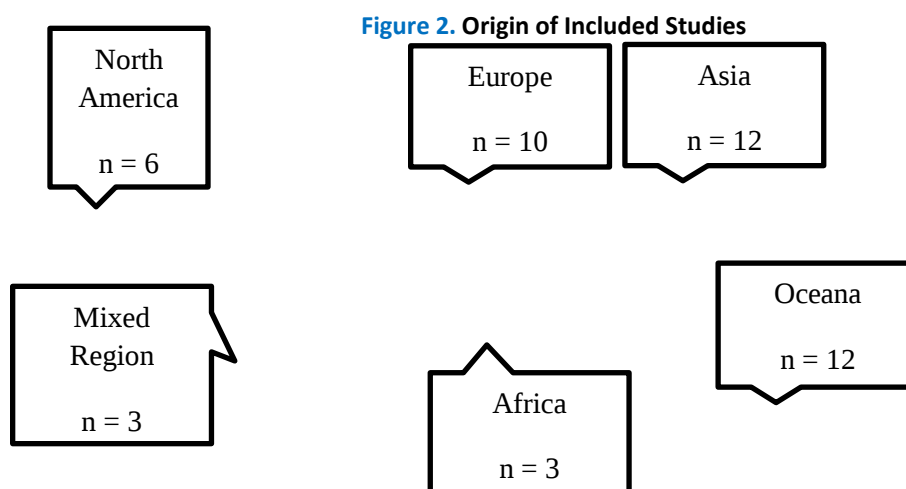
The studies included in this review originate from diverse regions, highlighting the global interest in the topic. Below are the regions and the number of included studies. The reviewed studies were done in several regions of the world, Asia first had 12 studies, Europe had 10 studies, Oceania had 8 studies and North America had 6 studies. Africa and mixed regions studies were underrepresented each taking 3 studies.

Table 4. Summary of Included Studies

Name of Countries by Region	Number of Studies by Region
Asia	12
Europe	10
Oceania	8
North America	6
Africa	3
Mixed Region	3

This distribution implies that there is a high rate of research in Asia and Europe which represents the regional priorities and educational research potentials whereas other parts of the world such as Africa are underrepresented. In general, the statistics indicate that there is a concern on the subject worldwide with significant focus in specific areas.

The Map of the Study



Data Analysis

Thematic synthesis was applied to the extracted data to reveal common concepts and patterns when it comes to the role of leadership in influencing the adoption of reform, as well as its long-term sustainability. The coding was done in three steps:

- 1) Open coding - initial descriptive codes are given to the major findings.
- 2) Axial coding - classifying codes into themes (e.g., collaborative culture, capacity building, adaptive leadership).



- 3) Selective coding - putting together thematic ideas that are conceptual relationships.

This analytical work made it possible to identify four prevailing meta-themes, which are (1) context-responsive leadership, (2) capacity building and professional learning, (3) collaborative governance, and (4) sustainability through system alignment. These themes are aligned with current evidence that showed that efficient educational leadership needs to be flexible to local conditions, constantly developing professionally, shared decision-making frameworks, and policy-practice alignment to initiate long-term advances (Leithwood et al., 2020; Day et al., 2019). There was an analytical framework that utilizes the theory of leadership (Leithwood et al., 2020) and implementation science (Fixsen et al., 2024) to explain the interplay of leadership behaviors and systems to maintain educational reforms.

Results

Characteristics of Included Reviews

Based on the database search and screening processes, 42 reviews and empirical syntheses published after 2015 and until 2025 were identified as eligible to qualify in the qualitative synthesis. Recording the count of studies that were included in every phase of a systematic review is also consistent with the PRISMA 2020 recommendation, which highlights the importance of transparency, reproducibility, and methodological rigor as the key aspects of the evidence synthesis reporting (Page et al., 2021). The research cuts across different regions (e.g., Europe, Asia, Oceania), schooling (primary, secondary), leadership structures (instructional, transformational, distributed, sustainable leadership), and reform stages (adoption, implementation, sustainability). As an illustration, a review carried out by McLure and Aldridge (2023) summarized the research on reform sustainment in the years 2000-2020. Regional, school setting, year of publication and study design breakdowns are found in Table 2 and Figures 3-6 of this manuscript.

Findings of the Thematic Analysis

Thematic synthesis showed that there are four major meta-themes about the relationship between school leadership and change adoption and maintenance:

1. ***Context-Responsive Leadership Facilitating Reform Adoption.***

According to several reviews, the significance of responsive leadership practices to the local circumstances cannot be ignored in the initial adoption of the reform. To illustrate, a review by Pont (2020) established that the school leadership policy is highly influenced by conditions on the system level (autonomy, accountability, decentralization, and local culture). Leaders who congruent reform goals with local value, develop trust and establish a collaborative structure make change uptake easy. This implies that adoption is not solely regarding leader behaviors as such, but the way they are institutionalized within an effective local strategy.

2. ***Capacity Building and Professional Learning Supporting Sustainability.***

Reform sustainability seems to be particularly connected to types of leadership that enhance capacity in the long-term - continuous professional learning, distributed leadership, monitoring, and stakeholder involvement. McLure & Aldridge (2023) have found that shared leadership, professional learning, data-monitoring, staff stability and adequate resources are some of the most prominent enablers of sustained reform. It changes the emphasis of one-off adoption to the routine embedded change.

3. ***Distributed and Transformational Leadership as Mechanisms between Adoption and Sustainment.***

The distributive leadership models and promoting transformative culture were found to be the mechanisms between adoption and sustainability. As a case in point, Daniel Mifsud (2024) in a survey of distributed leadership (2010-2022) discovered that distributed leadership promotes teacher agency, collaborative learning, and institutionalization of change. Likewise, a survey of the transformational leadership (Wilson and Heenan, 2023) revealed that transformational behavior (setting vision, collective efficacy, staff empowerment) positively affects the school culture and staff willingness to change. These results indicate that a blended leadership style involving transformational vision and shared ability can be the most productive.

4. ***Adaptive and Systemic Leadership to Align Reforms in the Long-term.***

It is also stated in the literature that the adaptive systems thinking and sustainability frameworks-oriented leadership promote long-term reform. To illustrate, leadership behaviors measured to long-term goals (social, environmental and organizational) and continuous enhancements were the arguments in the review



conducted by Boeske (2023) on leadership towards sustainability. According to this approach, sustainability is not about keeping things the way they are, but about practice renewed on an ongoing basis.

Summary of Results

- ✓ Leadership at the forefront of change adoption ensures that it is aligned in the local context, creates vision and trust as well as involving stakeholders early.
- ✓ The leadership styles that enhance sustainability include capacity building, institutionalization of professional learning, distributing leadership functions, fidelity monitoring, and changing with time.
- ✓ The combination of transformational, instructional and distributed practices seems to offer the best means of adoption to sustainability.
- ✓ Sustainable leadership is not all about school-level practices: it is imperative to align on the system level, carry continuity of resources, and policy guarantees.
- ✓ One of the patterns that persist in that the reviews provide is that the concept of sustainability is defined in many ways, longitudinal evidence is not widespread, and not many studies directly relate leadership practices to long-term reform outcomes over 3-5 years.

Figure 3. Number of Included Reviews by Region

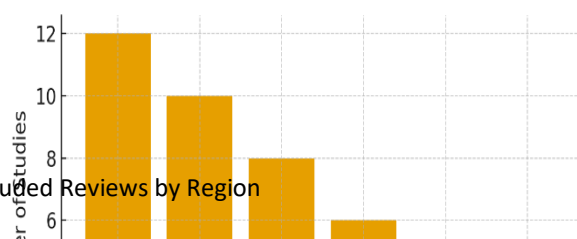


Figure 4. Study School Setting

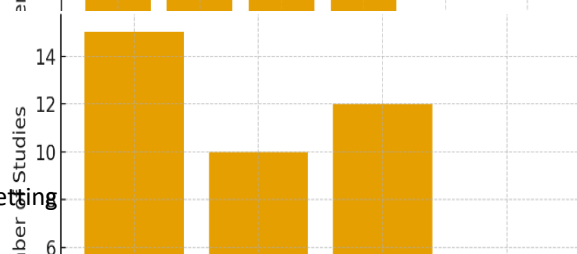
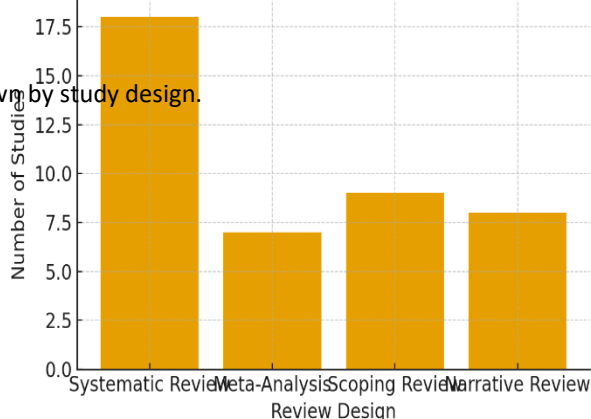


Figure 5. Breakdown by year published



Figure 6. Breakdown by study design.



Discussion

The review results highlight the fact that educational change leadership is context-based and multi-dimensional. Based on the thematic analysis, it can be seen that school leadership can have an impact on the adoption and



sustainability stages of reform via capacity building mechanisms, professional learning structures and responsive governance mechanisms. Indicatively, a review by sustaining reform implementation: a systematic literature review by (McLure and Aldridge, 2023) which synthesized two hundred forty-nine (249) empirical studies, determined that sustained reform is contingent on multiple leadership driving processes, including shared leadership, data monitoring, professional development, stakeholder engagement and staffing stability. These results are consistent with the policy-context view determined by a literature review of school leadership policy reforms (Pont, 2020) that contributed to the statement that an autonomy factor, accountability factor, and decentralization factor mediate the effect of leadership on the adoption of reform.

Such trends imply that all the levels of leadership: the school, the system/policy environment and working through professional networks, should be effective in doing both adopting and sustaining reforms. The nature of leadership practice is another dimension that is vital; the blend of transformational / distributed / adaptive. Indicatively, in a review article *The Impact of Transformational School Leadership on School Staff and School Culture in Primary Schools: A Systematic Review of International Literature* (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023), the researchers established that transformational leadership is linked to a positive school culture and teacher motivation, which are major sources of maintaining change. Similarly, the article *Preparing Schools for Educational Change: Barriers and supports* (Aldridge and McLure, 2024) found that the barriers (e.g., lack of resources, staff turnover, etc.) that obstruct reforms to become embedded in practice had to be met by the leadership. Most importantly, when combined, the discussion identifies the concept of leadership as dynamic (not static), relational (not limited to being directive), and systemic (within context). The ability of the leaders to institute change adoption and sustainability leadership becomes evident when leaders institutionalize change learning structures, track implementation, involve stakeholders in meaningful ways, and align reforms with the local/organizational cultures.

Limitations

This review has a number of limitations that can be used to moderate the interpretations and inform the research directions in the future. First, even though an effort was made to cover a wide range of current reviews, the use of studies published mostly in English might have omitted any significant reviews in other languages or localities that can provide insight into the findings. The limitation of systematic reviews to English-language publications is known to cause language bias and the inability to use all evidence that can be used in systematic review (Dobrescu et al., 2021). Second, numerous of the incorporated review articles continue to be based on short-term empirical evidence (1-3 years gaps) instead of extensive longitudinal results of reform sustainability as McLure and Aldridge (2023) themselves mentioned. Third, the heterogeneity of constructs and measurement translates to insufficient comparability across settings because of the existence of many types of reforms (curriculum change, digital learning, pedagogical innovation) and leadership models (instructional, distributed, transformational). Fourth, this review is concerned with school-level leadership, but not with district or system-level leadership interactions, which numerous reviews (e.g., Pont, 2020) consider are pertinent but under-researched.

Implications for Practice

To practitioners (e.g., school principals, district leaders, policy-makers), the results have practical implications:

- ✓ Establish leadership communities and common frameworks: According to the insights offered by McLure and Aldridge (2023), the capacity to develop sustainable reform lies not in individual charismatic leaders but in the leadership capabilities that can be established within teams and distributed frameworks.
- ✓ Make reform contextual: According to Pont (2020), leaders need to evaluate their policy environment (autonomy/accountability) and school culture to match reform adoption strategies, based on these factors.
- ✓ Integrate systems of continuous professional learning and monitoring: According to the transformational leadership review (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023), feedback loops, social growth, and culture of learning should be institutionalized by the leadership; therefore, teacher motivation and positive culture are a significant aspect.
- ✓ Address systemic barriers: Staffing turnover, resource constraints, implementation fidelity are some examples of barriers to sustainability; a leadership must plan accordingly (Aldridge & McLure, 2024).
- ✓ The leaders are supposed to be dual-focus, instructional leadership and organizational management, distributed leadership, and long-term monitoring and professional development. The funding and accountability by policymakers should be made to facilitate sustainment.

Conclusion

To sum up, school leadership has a significant impact on the adoption and sustainability of change, which is significant, and complicated. It has been found out that when leaders not only initiate reform but also help to institutionalize it, that is, to build the - capacity to institute change, to facilitate mutual leadership, to engage stakeholders, to practice with sensitivity to context, and to coordinate across levels, they are much more likely to



achieve lasting improvements (Wilson Heenan, De Paor, Lafferty, and Mannix McNamara, 2023; Abu Bakar, Ishak, and Mansor, 2024). A sustainability-oriented leadership should thus be relational (with focus on trust and a sense of collaboration in sense-making), systemic (linking classroom activities, school culture and district policy) and proactive (anticipating change, designing to be long-term viable and not short-term uptake). As a case in point, evidence exists that distributed and context-responsive leadership practices result in an augmentation of teacher ownership and hence the possibility of the long-lasting innovation over and above the initial change phase. (Massouti, Shaya & Abukhait, 2023). In the future, longitudinal studies with long-term adoption of reforms followed-up to sustainable results should be prioritized, leadership across levels (school, district, policy) should be integrated instead of researching isolated principals, and sustainability outcome measurement should be standardized in such a way that educational reforms should last.

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