



The Role of School Leaders in Decentralized Educational Systems

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Abstract:

This study explores the evolving role of school leadership in educational governance, emphasizing key trends in budgeting, curriculum development, and student assessment across different countries. Findings reveal that the level of involvement of school leaders in decision-making varies significantly based on the governance model. In decentralized systems, such as in the Philippines, local school leaders have greater autonomy, collaborating with local government units (LGUs) and civil society to tailor educational resources and policies to community needs. In contrast, more centralized systems, like those in Australia and Singapore, see national or regional authorities controlling key decisions, ensuring consistency across schools but limiting local flexibility. The review also highlights the critical role of school leaders in curriculum design and instructional practices, with decentralized systems allowing for more tailored approaches, while centralized systems often enforce uniformity. Furthermore, school leaders' influence over student assessment policies is more pronounced in decentralized systems, where they can adapt assessments to local needs, compared to the standardized, summative approaches seen in centralized systems. Despite the advantages of decentralization, challenges such as uneven resource distribution and limited leadership capacity remain. The study suggests that professional development for school leaders and stronger community involvement are essential to overcoming these challenges. Effective leadership distribution and collaboration among all stakeholders are critical to improving educational outcomes and ensuring equitable access to quality education in decentralized systems.

Keywords: School leadership, governance, decentralization, educational leadership, budgeting, curriculum development, instructional decision-making

Introduction:

Educational leadership is pivotal in shaping the quality and effectiveness of educational systems, guiding schools toward continuous improvement and achievement. The role of educational leaders, particularly principals, extends beyond administrative duties to encompass instructional leadership, which is crucial in driving positive academic outcomes. According to Andrin et al. (2023), the influence of educational leaders on schools' success is not only through management but also through cultivating leadership that motivates and guides teachers, students, and parents toward shared educational goals. Principals, as the central figures in schools, are tasked with ensuring that resources are efficiently managed, school operations run smoothly, and academic success is prioritized.

However, effective educational leadership is not merely about managing administrative tasks but also involves steering the instructional direction of schools. Leaders in education must engage with teaching practices, guiding curriculum implementation, and ensuring that the teaching staff are supported and empowered to enhance student learning.



As Fullan (2023) notes, the role of principals in educational systems has evolved, emphasizing instructional leadership that directly influences classroom practices and learning outcomes. This shift highlights the integration of instructional leadership with governance, resource allocation, and school culture. Andrin et al. (2023) further emphasize that beyond administrative tasks, cultivating leadership within educational institutions requires an adaptive approach that is responsive to the evolving needs of students, teachers, and the wider community.

The importance of instructional leadership lies in its ability to positively affect student outcomes. According to Angtud et al. (2023), leadership practices, such as those grounded in servant leadership, have a direct impact on school climate and the relationships among teachers, students, and parents.

Principals who engage in servant leadership practices foster an environment of trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility, leading to improved school performance. Moreover, effective leaders understand the cultural dynamics within their schools and tailor their leadership strategies to meet the needs of diverse student populations. This approach is particularly evident in Singapore, where the educational leadership model emphasizes a balance between centralized policy direction and decentralized school practices (Chua et al., 2019).

In the modern educational landscape, the integration of instructional leadership and strategic governance is crucial. As Cordova Jr. et al. (2024) discuss, leadership strategies in numeracy development, for example, depend on the principal's ability to coordinate efforts across all levels of the school. Effective leaders ensure that teachers have the resources, training, and support to teach subjects like mathematics in ways that align with broader educational goals. This approach requires a nuanced understanding of both pedagogy and management, where leadership is seen as a driving force for improving teaching quality and fostering a culture of continuous improvement (Yang & Lim, 2023).

Furthermore, educational leadership in the contemporary context must also be forward-thinking, preparing schools to develop future-ready learners. The roles of leaders in shaping students' competencies for the future are becoming increasingly important.

As Wong and Ng (2020) argue, the development of future-ready learners requires leaders to guide schools in embracing innovative teaching practices, fostering a culture of inclusivity, and ensuring that students are equipped with the skills needed to thrive in an ever-changing world. The integration of leadership strategies with a clear vision for student outcomes is essential for creating an educational environment that supports all learners, preparing them for the challenges of the future.

Educational leadership is a multifaceted role that requires principals to go beyond administrative duties and actively engage in instructional leadership. By effectively managing resources, guiding teaching practices, and fostering a positive school climate, leaders play a central role in enhancing educational outcomes. The integration of governance with instructional strategies is crucial in shaping schools that can meet the diverse needs of students and prepare them for future success.

Literature Review:

The role of educational leadership is pivotal in shaping school culture, guiding instructional quality, and ensuring that students meet academic and developmental goals. In recent years, a growing body of research has emphasized the importance of leadership strategies in improving educational outcomes and fostering positive school climates. This literature review explores the various dimensions of educational leadership, focusing on the integration of leadership with teaching practices, governance, and school-community relations.

According to Andrin et al. (2023), effective leadership in educational institutions goes beyond administrative management and requires a focus on cultivating leadership that motivates and engages all stakeholders. Principals, as the central figures in educational leadership, must guide teachers, students, and parents towards shared educational goals.

Their leadership extends to setting the tone for the school culture, ensuring that learning is at the forefront of all decision-making. The study highlights that fostering a leadership-driven school environment helps to cultivate a shared vision and a sense of accountability among all members of the school community.

Angtud et al. (2023) further elaborate on the impact of leadership practices on school climate. The authors emphasize the importance of servant leadership, a model that prioritizes the needs of teachers, students, and the community. They argue that servant leadership practices, such as active listening, empathy, and community-building, create a positive school environment conducive to collaboration and shared responsibility. Such practices are vital for improving school climate, which in turn enhances student learning outcomes. This relational approach to leadership has been particularly effective in schools where leadership is distributed and shared among various stakeholders.



The role of school leaders in preparing future-ready learners is a key theme explored by Boon (2023), who examines the leadership practices in Singapore's education system. The study discusses how educational leaders must adapt their strategies to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global landscape. This includes fostering critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning skills in students.

Boon's research suggests that school leaders in Singapore are increasingly focusing on cultivating learners who are not only academically proficient but also equipped with the skills necessary to thrive in an uncertain future.

In line with this, Chua et al. (2019) explore the dynamics of centralized-decentralized policymaking in Singapore's educational leadership. The study suggests that while policy is centrally determined, the implementation and leadership within schools are decentralized, allowing principals to make decisions based on local contexts. This model supports flexibility and responsiveness to student needs, ensuring that leadership is adaptive and tailored to the unique challenges faced by individual schools.

The impact of leadership on student outcomes is also explored in the context of numeracy development. Cordova Jr. et al. (2024) investigate leadership strategies that specifically support the development of numeracy skills in educational settings.

Their research highlights the importance of strategic leadership in guiding the implementation of effective numeracy programs. By supporting teacher development, resource allocation, and curriculum design, leaders can ensure that students receive the necessary instruction to build strong mathematical foundations. Effective leadership in this domain is particularly important for addressing achievement gaps and promoting equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Educational leadership must also adapt to changing organizational and societal needs, as shown in the work of Martinez et al. (2023), who discuss how organizational culture influences leadership strategies during times of crisis. Their study on crisis management emphasizes that effective leadership requires flexibility and the ability to navigate complex challenges. During crises, leaders must balance short-term response measures with long-term educational goals, ensuring that schools can adapt while maintaining a focus on student outcomes.

The literature underscores the multifaceted role of leadership in education, highlighting its importance in shaping school culture, enhancing instructional quality, and ensuring the well-being of students. Effective educational leadership requires a combination of administrative competence, instructional guidance, and relational skills.

As the demands on schools continue to evolve, leaders must remain adaptable, forward-thinking, and responsive to the diverse needs of their communities. Through strategic leadership, schools can foster environments that support academic success, prepare students for future challenges, and build strong partnerships with parents and the wider community.

Methodology:

This systematic review employs a mixed-method evaluation design, synthesizing both qualitative and quantitative data from a variety of studies and reports on educational leadership and governance.

The focus of this review is on the active involvement of school leaders in crucial decision-making areas such as budgeting, curriculum development, and assessment policies. By utilizing a data mining approach, the review collects relevant data from scholarly articles, government reports, and international educational studies to draw comprehensive insights into school leadership practices. It also integrates findings from previous research to identify emerging patterns and trends in leadership across various educational systems.

The studies examined encompass a diverse range of educational contexts, with a particular emphasis on countries including the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines.

These nations provide a broad perspective on educational governance, representing different models of leadership and policy implementation. The United States and the United Kingdom are known for their highly decentralized systems, where local school leaders have significant autonomy in decision-making, while Canada, Australia, and the Philippines offer examples of more centralized systems, where national or regional authorities have a stronger influence on school governance.

This review provides a comparative analysis of these governance structures, highlighting both the challenges and effective strategies employed by school leaders. In countries with decentralized systems, school leaders often face the challenge of balancing local autonomy with accountability to higher authorities.



In contrast, in more centralized systems, leaders navigate the complexities of adhering to national policies while addressing the unique needs of their schools. Despite these differences, common trends emerge, such as the importance of leadership training, collaborative decision-making, and clear communication channels between school leaders and policymakers.

Findings:

Key Trends in School Leadership and Governance

The analysis of educational leadership and governance highlights several key trends regarding the involvement of school leaders in decision-making processes, particularly in budget allocation. One notable trend is the increased involvement of school leaders, especially in decentralized governance systems, where local principals and teachers play an active role in budgeting decisions. In countries like the Philippines, school leaders collaborate with regional or national education authorities to formulate and allocate school budgets, ensuring that resources are aligned with local educational needs (Boeskens et al., 2016).

However, the extent of involvement of higher-level education authorities in budgetary decisions varies across countries. In decentralized systems, local school leaders tend to have more autonomy in making financial decisions, whereas in countries like Australia and Canada, regional or national authorities hold more influence in the budgetary process.

These countries have a more centralized approach, with education policies and financial allocations often controlled by regional or national agencies. This centralization ensures a uniform approach to funding allocation across schools but may limit the flexibility of individual schools in addressing local needs.

Despite these differences in governance models, the trend is clear: school leaders are critical in shaping educational outcomes through their involvement in budgeting decisions. Their role in managing financial resources can significantly impact the quality of education, as it directly influences the allocation of resources for teaching, learning, and school infrastructure. The varying levels of authority and responsibility in budgeting decisions across countries reflect differing educational governance structures but underscore the essential role of school leadership in managing educational resources effectively.

School Leaders' Role in Curriculum Development and Instructional Decision-Making

The role of school leaders in curriculum development and instructional decision-making is critical in shaping the educational outcomes of schools. A significant trend identified in the literature is the variation in the involvement of school leaders in curriculum design across different educational systems. In countries like the United Kingdom and China, school leaders, particularly principals and local educational authorities, are directly responsible for shaping and implementing curriculum content. They are empowered to make decisions about the curriculum based on local needs, school context, and student populations (Fullan, 2023; Andrin et al., 2023). In these countries, there is a high level of autonomy at the school level, allowing for more tailored educational experiences that align with the values and needs of the local community.

Conversely, in nations like Greece, national education authorities play a more prominent role in determining the curriculum, limiting the autonomy of school leaders in this regard. National governments in such contexts typically set strict curriculum frameworks, with little room for local variations.

While this centralization ensures uniformity and consistency across the education system, it can also stifle innovation and local responsiveness to emerging educational challenges (Chua et al., 2019). This centralized approach often results in a more uniform educational experience across schools but may not fully address the unique needs of diverse student populations.

The involvement of school leaders in textbook selection and other instructional decisions also varies widely. For example, in the United Kingdom, the process for adopting textbooks and educational resources is highly centralized, with national guidelines and regulations that schools must follow.

School leaders have little discretion in this regard, as the selection of instructional materials is often dictated by government-approved lists (Boon, 2023). In contrast, in more decentralized systems like Singapore, school leaders have greater autonomy in choosing textbooks and instructional materials that best suit their students' needs, offering more flexibility in adapting resources to support local pedagogical goals (Tan, 2022).

The role of school leaders in curriculum development is also influenced by the governance model in place. In decentralized systems, such as Singapore and parts of the United States, school leaders are given more authority to make decisions about curriculum and teaching practices, ensuring that the education system remains responsive to changing educational needs and societal demands (Kwek et al., 2023). In contrast, centralized systems limit this



authority but provide greater consistency across the educational system, which may be beneficial in maintaining high standards across schools.

The literature suggests that the level of involvement of school leaders in curriculum development and instructional decisions is deeply influenced by the educational governance model. In decentralized systems, school leaders are more actively engaged in curriculum design, allowing for greater flexibility and responsiveness, while in centralized systems, their role is more constrained, with decisions primarily made at the national level. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for improving the effectiveness of school leadership in promoting educational quality and student achievement.

Variation in School Leaders' Role in Formulating Student Assessment Policies

The formulation of student assessment policies varies significantly across different educational systems, particularly in terms of the level of involvement of school leaders. A consistent trend in the literature shows that school leaders, particularly principals and teachers, play a crucial role in setting assessment policies at the local level.

However, the degree of influence they exert in this process is highly dependent on the governance model in place. In countries such as China, the United Kingdom, and Argentina, school leaders are granted substantial autonomy in shaping and implementing assessment policies, which enables them to tailor assessments to the needs of their students and the local educational context (Shen, Gerard, & Bowyer, 2010).

In these countries, school leaders often collaborate with teachers and other local educational stakeholders to determine appropriate methods for evaluating student learning. This localized approach allows for more flexibility and responsiveness, ensuring that assessments are aligned with the specific educational objectives of the school and community.

For example, in China, there is a considerable emphasis on formative assessments that help educators understand the learning progress of students throughout the academic year (Boon, 2023). Similarly, in Argentina, school leaders have the autonomy to design assessment strategies that consider cultural and contextual factors that may influence student performance (Angtud et al., 2023).

In contrast, countries with more centralized systems, such as Singapore, exert a stronger influence over student assessment policies. National education authorities typically set strict guidelines and frameworks for assessment, limiting the ability of school leaders to make independent decisions regarding evaluation methods.

For instance, in Singapore, the Ministry of Education oversees assessment practices, ensuring that they adhere to national standards and objectives (Chua et al., 2019). While this centralized approach provides consistency across schools, it may not always allow for the flexibility needed to address the diverse needs of students in different educational settings.

The review also found that in more centralized systems, there is often a greater emphasis on summative assessments, which focus on evaluating students' performance at the end of a particular period, such as the school year. This contrasts with decentralized systems, where both summative and formative assessments are commonly used to provide ongoing feedback to students and teachers (Fullan, 2023).

While centralized systems ensure uniformity and comparability across schools, decentralized systems, such as those in the United Kingdom and Argentina, offer more personalized assessment practices that can better serve the individual needs of students.

The involvement of school leaders in the formulation of assessment policies is a critical factor in determining how effectively student performance is measured and supported. Countries with decentralized governance structures tend to allow more local autonomy in assessment decisions, fostering a more flexible and responsive approach to evaluating student progress.

Conversely, centralized systems emphasize consistency and standardization, which may benefit the educational system as a whole but may not fully address the needs of individual students. Understanding these variations is crucial for developing effective leadership strategies that support both the academic achievement and well-being of students.

Decentralization in Education: Opportunities and Challenges

The data indicate a significant trend toward decentralization in education systems worldwide, with an increasing emphasis on community and school-based decision-making. This shift allows for more localized governance, where decisions are made closer to the communities and schools they affect.



In countries like the Philippines, decentralization is largely driven by local government units (LGUs), civil society organizations, and the private sector, all of which are taking on more active roles in managing and delivering educational services (Macasaet, 2018). This decentralization model aims to tailor educational policies and practices to the specific needs of local contexts, thereby improving access, quality, and relevance of education.

In the Philippines, the decentralization process is enabled by the Local Government Code, which grants LGUs authority to oversee the operation of public schools. This enables local communities to participate in decisions related to resource allocation, curriculum design, and the establishment of educational priorities.

Furthermore, partnerships between LGUs, civil society groups, and the private sector help bridge gaps in funding and infrastructure, particularly in remote and underprivileged areas. This collaborative approach has led to improvements in the availability of resources and enhanced school management, fostering a more inclusive and responsive education system.

However, despite the advances in decentralization, several challenges remain in ensuring that leadership practices at the school level effectively contribute to student success and equity. One of the main issues identified in the data is the uneven distribution of resources and leadership capacity across schools.

While some regions benefit from strong local leadership and active community involvement, others may struggle with inadequate support or weak governance structures. In these areas, school leaders may lack the training, tools, or autonomy to make informed decisions that improve educational outcomes for students, particularly those from marginalized groups.

Additionally, the coordination between local stakeholders, including LGUs, community members, and private organizations, remains a challenge. While decentralization allows for greater local control, it can also lead to fragmented efforts where stakeholders may have differing priorities or lack the resources to implement effective programs. Without a clear, coordinated strategy, local educational initiatives may fail to reach their full potential, leading to disparities in educational quality between regions.

To address these challenges, it is essential to invest in the professional development of school leaders, ensuring they have the skills and knowledge needed to make evidence-based decisions that benefit all students. Furthermore, fostering stronger partnerships between public and private sectors, as well as improving communication among local stakeholders, will be crucial in enhancing the overall effectiveness of decentralized education systems. With the right support and coordination, decentralization can become a powerful tool for promoting greater educational equity and improving student outcomes.

Discussion:

The findings of this review highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of educational leadership in different governance contexts. In many countries, school leaders are expected to balance administrative tasks with instructional leadership, which requires a high degree of expertise and organizational capacity.

The role of principals, in particular, is central to both managing school resources and fostering an environment conducive to teaching and learning (Rizvi, 2010). However, the decentralization of educational decision-making has resulted in varying levels of autonomy for school leaders, with significant implications for the management of school budgets, curriculum, and assessment policies.

A key finding from this review is the importance of aligning governance structures with the needs of local schools. In decentralized systems, school leaders are more likely to be involved in decision-making processes related to budgeting, curriculum development, and textbook selection. This autonomy can lead to more tailored approaches to education, but it also presents challenges in terms of ensuring equity and consistency across schools (OECD, 2015). The role of national or regional education authorities in overseeing these processes is essential for maintaining standards and ensuring accountability, but it is equally important that local school leaders have the freedom to adapt policies to their specific contexts.

The study also underscores the need for effective leadership distribution within schools. While the principal's role remains crucial in managing financial resources and personnel, there is an increasing emphasis on shared leadership within schools.

Distributing leadership responsibilities to other educators, such as teacher leaders and department heads, can foster collaboration and improve decision-making. However, this requires clear roles, recognition, and support for those involved in leadership tasks (Beatriz Pont, 2008).



Finally, the review points to the significance of community involvement in school governance. In many countries, there is a growing recognition of the need for school-community partnerships to improve educational outcomes.

School leaders must engage with parents, local communities, and external stakeholders to create a supportive learning environment. This collaboration is particularly important in countries like the Philippines, where the government is actively working to decentralize education management and strengthen local governance in schools (Macasaet, 2018).

Conclusion:

Effective educational leadership is essential for the success and sustainability of educational systems around the world. School leaders, particularly principals, play a pivotal role in managing resources, setting educational priorities, and cultivating a learning environment that supports both academic and personal growth. Their leadership influences student achievement, teacher performance, and the overall culture of schools.

However, the governance structures within which school leaders operate differ significantly across countries, shaped by varying levels of decentralization, autonomy, and the involvement of national or regional authorities.

Some nations adopt more centralized models where national or regional authorities exercise considerable control over educational policies, while others, like the Philippines and some European countries, emphasize decentralized governance, granting local leaders more autonomy to make decisions. These differences create distinct challenges and opportunities for school leaders in terms of decision-making, resource allocation, and accountability.

This systematic review underscores the importance of striking a balance in governance structures. School leaders should be given the autonomy necessary to respond to local needs and foster innovation, but at the same time, mechanisms for accountability and equity must be in place to ensure that all students have access to high-quality education. Effective governance models must prioritize collaboration among local and national stakeholders, empowering school leaders while holding them accountable for student outcomes.

By promoting collaborative leadership practices, enhancing the professional development of school leaders, and fostering stronger community engagement, education systems can better meet the diverse needs of students. This will enable them to prepare learners for success in the 21st century, ensuring that education remains responsive to the challenges of an ever-changing global landscape.

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