



Leading Schools in the Digital Era: The Evolving Concept of Digital Leadership in Education

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Renith S. Guanzon, LPT, PhD (EdM), PhD (ScEd-Math)

SGS PhD Program Head, STI West Negros University, Bacolod City, Philippines

Genevieve P. Tan, MBA

Dean, STI West Negros University, Bacolod City, Philippines

Maria Christina F. Bagundol, LPT, PhD

College Professor, STI West Negros University, Bacolod City, Philippines

Marijo G. Garcia, MBA

College Professor, STI West Negros University, Bacolod City, Philippines

Ma. Ivette Heart D. Salazar, LPT, MBA

Faculty Member, STI West Negros University, Bacolod City, Philippines

Francisca T. Uy, EdD

ECT Excellencia Global Academy Foundation, Inc., Buanoy, Balamban, Cebu, Philippines

Abstract:

The increasing prevalence of digital tools and technologies has made digital leadership a crucial component of educational transformation. This systematic review explores the concept of digital leadership in school management, examining its characteristics, models, and practical applications. By analyzing recent literature from 2012 to 2023, the review identifies key themes that highlight how digital leadership can enhance teaching, learning, and administrative practices in schools. The review reveals that digital leaders play a vital role in guiding schools through technological changes, fostering professional development, and improving student outcomes through effective use of digital tools. However, the review also identifies gaps in the current research, particularly in areas such as community engagement, inclusivity, and the development of standardized models of digital leadership. To address these gaps, the review suggests that future research should focus on the diverse perspectives of school leaders across different regions and educational contexts. Additionally, there is a need for further exploration of how digital leadership can promote accessibility and equity in digital education. The review concludes by offering recommendations for future studies and providing insights for the practical application of digital leadership to support effective educational management and improve school performance.

Keywords: Digital Leadership, Educational Transformation, Technology Integration, School Management, Digital Tools in Education

Introduction:

The 21st century has ushered in transformative changes in education, largely driven by the rapid advancements in digital technologies. These developments, often referred to as part of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, have significantly altered how students engage with learning and redefined the role of educators in the teaching process (Peng, 2021). The adoption of digital tools for teaching, learning, and administration has become increasingly widespread, as schools strive to integrate these innovations into their systems.

However, the successful incorporation of these technologies demands effective leadership, particularly digital leadership, which ensures that technology is aligned with educational goals to enhance outcomes for both students and teachers (Avidov-Ungar et al., 2022).

Digital leadership is crucial in guiding the digital transformation within schools, ensuring that technology serves the learning community's best interests. It encompasses the ability of educational leaders to manage and direct technology implementation in a way that promotes student engagement, fosters professional growth for educators, and enhances overall educational outcomes (Shin et al., 2023).

Digital leadership requires a clear vision for how technology can improve learning processes, alongside the skills to foster collaboration, professional development, and innovation within schools (Sheninger, 2014). Although the significance of digital leadership in education is becoming increasingly recognized, research in this area remains limited compared to other sectors such as business or the military (Karakose et al., 2021).



Leadership in education is often framed within broader leadership models, including transactional and transformational leadership approaches. Bass (1997) suggests that transformational leadership, which focuses on inspiring and motivating staff toward achieving higher levels of performance, can be particularly beneficial in educational settings where digital tools are implemented.

Leaders who embrace transformational leadership empower their teachers and staff by promoting professional development and fostering a sense of shared purpose, both of which are critical for successfully integrating digital technologies. Furthermore, digital leaders must navigate the complexities of cultural and diversity issues within their school communities, ensuring that technology is used inclusively and equitably. Gay (2002) and Lindsey et al. (2018) emphasize the need for culturally responsive leadership that acknowledges the diverse backgrounds of students and integrates digital tools in ways that respect and enhance these differences.

The role of digital leadership extends beyond just the technological aspect of education; it is also about creating a supportive environment where teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to utilize these tools effectively.

Marzano et al. (2005) highlight the importance of instructional leadership, which supports teachers through professional development, feedback, and the creation of a positive school culture. As digital tools become an integral part of education, leaders must be proactive in fostering a culture of continuous learning for both teachers and students, helping them to adapt to and thrive in a digital world (Hobbs, 2010).

Moreover, the digital transformation of schools requires not only the technical capabilities to integrate technology but also the capacity to use it strategically to address the evolving needs of students. The integration of digital leadership can significantly impact how educators approach teaching and learning, transforming both the educational process and school management practices.

As schools navigate these changes, leadership must prioritize the continuous development of both technology infrastructure and the professional skills needed to maximize the potential of digital tools (Kilg et al., 2023; Sheninger, 2014).

This review explores the evolving concept of digital leadership in educational settings, examining its definition, characteristics, and practical applications. It seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital leadership can be effectively implemented in schools to ensure that technology serves as a powerful tool for improving educational practices and outcomes. As digital leadership continues to develop, its application in schools will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of education in the 21st century.

Literature Review:

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, digital leadership has emerged as a critical concept. The integration of digital tools and technologies has fundamentally transformed the teaching and learning process. At the heart of this transformation are school leaders, who must steer their institutions through the challenges of digital adaptation. Digital leadership is defined as the ability of school leaders to guide and manage the digital transformation of schools, ensuring that technology aligns with educational goals and improves outcomes for students and teachers (Sheninger, 2014; Oberer & Elkollar, 2018).

This concept goes beyond merely implementing technology; it encompasses a broader scope, including the cultivation of a culture of innovation, fostering digital literacy, and ensuring that technology is used responsibly to enhance the learning environment (Fareen, 2022; ISTE, 2021).

A more nuanced understanding of digital leadership emphasizes its central role in leading digital transformation processes. School leaders who are adept in digital leadership mobilize resources, influence stakeholders, and develop strategic plans that integrate technology into all aspects of school life.

This process involves aligning the technological needs of the school with its educational objectives, ensuring that teachers and students are equipped to succeed in a digital world (Sahin et al., 2020). As the world moves further into the Fourth Industrial Revolution, characterized by rapid technological advancements, the ability of educators to adapt and lead this change becomes increasingly important (Davies, Fidler, & Gorbis, 2011).

To effectively lead in a digital age, school leaders must possess certain characteristics that allow them to navigate the complexities of this role. One key attribute is the ability to shape the school's organizational structure and culture, driving change while fostering an environment of trust and transparency (Zhong, 2017).

Digital leaders are not just administrators but visionaries who inspire their communities to embrace technology as a tool for growth and improvement. Their role includes setting a clear vision for digital initiatives, guiding staff



through professional development, and ensuring that technology serves the educational needs of both teachers and students (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Sandi, 2022).

Moreover, digital leaders must possess an attitude of openness, humility, and empathy. These leaders should be approachable and capable of building strong, collaborative relationships with teachers and students. They need to exhibit a growth mindset, constantly learning and adapting as new technologies emerge (Abbu et al., 2022; Tanucan, 2022). This openness allows for a more inclusive approach to leadership, where feedback is valued, and everyone in the school community is encouraged to contribute ideas for improvement.

In addition to these personal qualities, digital leaders must have a deep knowledge of digital tools and how they can be applied in the classroom. This includes not only understanding the technical aspects of various tools but also being able to foster an environment where educators can develop their digital skills. As part of their professional development, leaders should create opportunities for teachers to engage with new technologies, promoting the adoption of digital tools that enhance teaching and learning (Özmen et al., 2020; Ardiansyah, 2020).

The models of digital leadership that have emerged provide frameworks for school leaders to implement technology in a way that promotes school-wide transformation. Sheninger's 7 Pillars of Digital Leadership, for example, offer a strategic approach that emphasizes vision, communication, student engagement, and public relations.

This model helps leaders focus on the key areas that influence the success of digital initiatives in schools (Sheninger, 2014). Other models emphasize the importance of integrating digital tools in teaching, fostering professional learning communities, and encouraging continuous innovation (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Digital leadership is an essential component of modern education, as it ensures that schools are equipped to handle the demands of an increasingly digital world. School leaders must not only manage the integration of technology but also shape a culture that embraces innovation and lifelong learning. By embracing the characteristics and models of digital leadership, school leaders can guide their institutions through successful digital transformations, ultimately improving educational outcomes for students and empowering teachers to thrive in a digital age.

Methodology:

This systematic review utilized a qualitative approach to examine the current body of literature on digital leadership in education. The inclusion criteria for selecting studies were as follows: publications between 2012 and 2023, written in English, and focused specifically on the role of school leaders—such as principals or school heads—in educational leadership. The initial search identified 145 studies. After a thorough screening process, 80 studies met the relevance criteria and were included in the review. These studies were drawn from well-regarded academic journals, with the majority accessed through the Google Scholar database.

The review followed a comprehensive protocol to ensure that only studies directly related to the research questions were included. The process involved screening study titles, abstracts, and full texts to assess their relevance and quality. To streamline the selection process and facilitate collaboration among multiple reviewers, the Rayyan tool was employed. This tool enhanced the efficiency and consistency of the systematic review process by allowing reviewers to conduct simultaneous assessments and resolve disagreements in a timely manner.

By adhering to a strict selection protocol and leveraging the Rayyan tool, this review ensured a robust and reliable analysis of the literature, focusing on the evolving role of school leaders in the integration and management of digital tools in educational settings.

Findings:

Strategic Planning and Visioning in Digital Leadership

Digital leadership in education requires school leaders to establish a clear, strategic vision for the integration of technology within the school environment. This responsibility involves more than just adopting digital tools; it necessitates aligning technological initiatives with the broader goals of the educational institution and the community it serves.

Successful digital leaders understand the importance of visioning as a foundation for effective digital transformation. By creating a shared vision that embraces innovation, they help ensure that technology use is purpose-driven and contributes to enhancing teaching and learning outcomes.



Studies consistently highlight that one of the defining characteristics of successful digital leaders is their ability to develop and implement a strategic plan for technology integration (Zhong, 2017). These leaders recognize that technology is not a standalone solution but rather an integral part of the larger educational framework. They emphasize that technology should support and reinforce the educational values of the school, such as fostering critical thinking, collaboration, and student engagement. For example, a digital leader may envision a classroom where technology facilitates personalized learning, enabling students to learn at their own pace while receiving tailored support based on their individual needs.

Moreover, digital leaders are tasked with ensuring that all stakeholders—teachers, students, parents, and the wider community—are aligned with this vision. Effective digital leadership involves communication and collaboration to ensure that everyone understands the value of technology and its role in achieving educational goals.

This includes involving teachers in the visioning process, empowering them with the skills and resources they need to integrate technology into their instructional practices. When teachers are part of the strategic planning process, they are more likely to be motivated and confident in using technology effectively in their classrooms.

A strong strategic vision also helps digital leaders anticipate challenges and plan for the future. The landscape of educational technology is constantly evolving, and digital leaders must stay abreast of emerging trends and potential disruptions in the field. For instance, as technology continues to advance, digital leaders must consider the implications of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and other innovations on teaching and learning. By creating a flexible and forward-thinking vision, digital leaders ensure that schools remain adaptable and responsive to changing needs, thereby improving the overall educational experience for all learners.

In addition to alignment with educational goals, the strategic vision for technology integration must include plans for professional development. As digital tools continue to evolve, teachers must receive ongoing training to effectively use new technologies.

Digital leaders are responsible for facilitating continuous professional learning opportunities, ensuring that teachers feel supported and capable in implementing technology-driven teaching methods. This includes providing access to resources, offering training sessions, and creating a culture of collaboration where educators can share best practices and learn from one another.

Furthermore, successful digital leadership requires constant evaluation and refinement of the strategic plan. It is essential to assess the effectiveness of digital initiatives, measure their impact on student learning, and adjust the strategy accordingly.

This ongoing feedback loop ensures that the vision remains relevant and effective in achieving its intended outcomes. By integrating technology thoughtfully and aligning it with educational goals, digital leaders can foster an environment of innovation and continuous improvement, ultimately benefiting both educators and students.

In conclusion, strategic planning and visioning are foundational elements of digital leadership in education. Digital leaders who develop a clear, inclusive, and adaptable vision for technology integration are better equipped to create a learning environment that embraces digital tools and enhances educational practices, ensuring long-term success and growth within the school community.

Technology Integration in Teaching and Learning

Digital leaders are instrumental in driving the successful integration of technology into the classroom, facilitating not only access to digital tools but also enhancing teaching and learning practices.

These leaders play a crucial role in ensuring that technology is effectively incorporated into educational processes, contributing to improved outcomes for both teachers and students. Studies emphasize that leaders who model the use of technology, offer professional development opportunities, and support teachers in developing digital competencies have a significantly greater impact on the successful implementation of digital tools in education (Sterrett et al., 2020).

One of the key responsibilities of digital leaders is to model the use of technology in educational settings. By demonstrating how technology can be used to enhance teaching, these leaders set a strong example for their teaching staff, showing practical applications that can inspire others to integrate technology into their own practice.



As emphasized by Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), transformational leadership, which includes modeling effective practices, plays a significant role in large-scale reform efforts within schools. Digital leaders who adopt this approach create an environment where technology is viewed as an essential component of the educational process, rather than an optional add-on.

In addition to leading by example, digital leaders must prioritize professional development for teachers to foster their digital competencies. Teachers need continuous support and training to keep pace with rapidly evolving technological tools and pedagogical strategies. By investing in professional development, digital leaders help educators feel confident and competent in using technology in their classrooms.

This support is vital in creating a culture where technology integration is not only accepted but embraced. Research by Marzano et al. (2005) and Hallinger and Murphy (1985) supports the idea that instructional leadership and professional development directly influence teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Effective training programs ensure that teachers can incorporate technology into their curricula in ways that enhance student engagement and understanding.

Another significant aspect of technology integration is ensuring that teachers have the necessary resources to succeed. Digital leaders must ensure that the technological infrastructure—such as reliable internet access, devices, and software—supports classroom activities.

This infrastructure is essential in overcoming barriers to technology use and ensuring that digital tools are accessible to all students, regardless of their background. Furthermore, digital leaders should encourage a collaborative approach, where teachers can share best practices, troubleshoot challenges, and learn from one another. As Hobbs (2010) notes, collaboration and the sharing of knowledge are key to promoting media literacy and the effective use of digital tools.

Furthermore, digital leadership is not just about supporting teachers but also about aligning technology integration with broader educational goals. Sheninger (2014) highlights the importance of aligning technology initiatives with the school's mission and vision, ensuring that digital tools are used to support pedagogical goals rather than merely for their own sake. This alignment ensures that technology enhances the learning experience, making it more engaging, personalized, and effective for students.

Digital leaders play a critical role in promoting the integration of technology in teaching and learning. By modeling technology use, supporting teachers' professional development, and ensuring access to necessary resources, these leaders foster a culture of digital fluency that benefits both educators and students. When digital leaders prioritize these aspects, they not only enhance teaching practices but also contribute to a more innovative and effective learning environment.

Professional Development and Community Engagement

Digital leaders play a pivotal role in fostering professional learning communities (PLCs) within schools, where educators can collaborate, share best practices, and learn from each other. By promoting a culture of continuous learning and professional growth, digital leaders ensure that teachers have the tools, resources, and knowledge needed to integrate technology effectively into their teaching.

However, despite the critical importance of community engagement, there remains limited research on how digital leaders influence such initiatives, particularly in the context of ensuring accessibility and inclusivity in digital education.

A fundamental aspect of effective digital leadership is creating a collaborative environment where educators feel supported and empowered. Leaders who prioritize professional development, as noted by Kilgus et al. (2023), are better able to enhance teachers' pedagogical practices and foster a culture of shared learning. By facilitating PLCs, digital leaders enable teachers to engage in reflective practices, exchange insights, and experiment with new digital tools and instructional strategies. This collaborative approach helps to break down silos within schools, encouraging interdisciplinary dialogue and promoting the use of technology in diverse subject areas.

Professional learning communities are particularly valuable because they provide a space for teachers to develop digital competencies collaboratively. As Hobbs (2010) points out, effective digital and media literacy initiatives require collaboration and knowledge-sharing, not just among students, but also among teachers.



In these communities, educators can explore innovative ways to use digital tools to enhance learning outcomes, ultimately benefiting their students' engagement and academic performance. Moreover, providing teachers with the opportunity to develop their digital skills ensures that they are not only adept at using technology but also able to implement it in pedagogically sound ways that align with broader educational goals (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

Beyond professional development, digital leaders also have a responsibility to promote community engagement and inclusivity in digital education. As digital tools become more integral to the educational process, it is essential that leaders ensure that all students, regardless of background, have equitable access to technology.

Research by García and Kleifgen (2010) highlights the challenges faced by emergent bilinguals and students from low-income backgrounds in accessing technology, which can exacerbate existing educational inequalities. Digital leaders must advocate for policies and practices that ensure all students have the necessary resources to participate fully in digital learning experiences.

Additionally, as the integration of technology in education continues to grow, digital leaders must be proactive in addressing issues related to digital equity. According to Sheninger (2014), digital leadership involves more than just the use of technology in teaching; it also includes ensuring that the tools and resources are accessible to every student, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location. This requires digital leaders to work closely with the community, school staff, and policymakers to secure the necessary infrastructure, such as affordable internet access and digital devices, for all students.

Furthermore, fostering inclusivity within the digital education space involves ensuring that the tools and content used in classrooms are culturally responsive and adaptable to diverse learners. Gay (2002) emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive teaching, and this principle extends to the digital realm. Digital leaders must ensure that the digital tools and resources used in the classroom reflect the diversity of students and are sensitive to their cultural contexts.

They also play an essential role in ensuring that technology integration is inclusive, equitable, and accessible for all students. While there is limited research on the specific role of digital leadership in community engagement and inclusivity, the available studies suggest that digital leaders have a critical responsibility to advocate for and create an inclusive digital learning environment that benefits both teachers and students.

Communication and Collaboration

Effective communication is a cornerstone of digital leadership, playing a crucial role in fostering collaboration and engagement within educational settings. The review highlights that digital leaders leverage both traditional and digital methods of communication to ensure that information is shared efficiently across various stakeholders, including teachers, students, and the wider community. By using diverse communication platforms, digital leaders are able to facilitate dialogue, foster cooperation, and create a transparent and inclusive environment that supports the integration of technology into teaching and learning.

The ability to communicate effectively is particularly important in the digital age, where technology plays an increasingly central role in education. Digital leaders must be adept at using a variety of communication tools to connect with different audiences. According to Verrmeulen et al. (2015), the use of digital platforms, such as emails, learning management systems (LMS), social media, and video conferencing, allows digital leaders to engage with teachers and students in real-time, overcoming geographical and time barriers. These tools also enable ongoing feedback and communication, which is essential for the continuous development of both students and teachers.

In addition to digital tools, traditional communication methods, such as face-to-face meetings, newsletters, and bulletin boards, remain valuable in ensuring that important messages are conveyed effectively, especially to those who may not be as comfortable with digital platforms. Digital leaders must balance the use of these diverse methods to ensure that all members of the school community, regardless of their technological proficiency, have access to the information they need.

Digital leaders also play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration within the school. By maintaining open lines of communication, they help create a culture of shared responsibility, where educators and students work together to achieve common goals. Collaborative environments, where teachers can share strategies and insights, are essential for the successful integration of technology in the classroom.



As noted by Bass (1997), transformational leaders, including digital leaders, motivate and inspire others to work collectively toward achieving a shared vision. This collaborative approach not only enhances professional development but also improves student outcomes by encouraging a more interactive and dynamic learning environment.

Moreover, the ability to engage with the broader community is an important aspect of digital leadership. By using communication tools to involve parents, local organizations, and other community members, digital leaders can help build partnerships that support students' learning experiences. Community engagement ensures that the school's initiatives are aligned with the needs and expectations of those outside the immediate educational environment.

Communication and collaboration are integral to the success of digital leadership. By utilizing a combination of traditional and digital communication methods, digital leaders are able to facilitate effective dialogue, foster collaboration, and create a more inclusive and connected educational community.

Discussion:

The findings of this review emphasize the complexity and evolving nature of digital leadership in education. Digital leadership plays a pivotal role in facilitating technology integration, promoting professional development, and advancing strategic planning within schools. However, despite the clear benefits and widespread support for its importance, there are notable gaps in the research, particularly in the areas of community engagement and inclusivity within the digital education landscape.

The concept of digital leadership remains multifaceted and often context-dependent, as evidenced by the variation in definitions and models found across studies. Digital leadership is not a one-size-fits-all construct; it adapts to the specific needs and challenges of each educational setting. According to Eberl and Drews (2021), digital leadership should be seen as a dynamic, context-sensitive construct that requires leaders to understand the unique context of their institutions, school systems, and communities. This insight underscores the necessity of ongoing research to standardize the concept of digital leadership, while also exploring how it can be effectively applied across various school systems, cultures, and educational contexts.

Furthermore, the literature reveals a growing recognition of the importance of digital leadership in facilitating technology integration. As schools increasingly rely on technology for teaching and learning, leaders must guide educators through the complexities of adopting and effectively using digital tools.

This aligns with the findings of Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), who emphasized the role of leadership in supporting the adoption of innovative educational practices. Digital leaders are tasked with ensuring that technology is not only integrated into classrooms but also used in ways that enhance the learning experience for all students.

In addition to technology integration, digital leadership is critical in supporting professional development. Research consistently shows that effective leadership promotes the continuous development of teachers, helping them adapt to new technologies and teaching methods.

This is particularly evident in studies by Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), who argue that transformational leadership fosters professional growth, motivating teachers to engage in lifelong learning and embrace new teaching strategies. However, the focus on professional development often overlooks the importance of community engagement and inclusivity, areas where further research is needed.

While much of the existing research emphasizes the role of digital leadership in technology adoption and professional development, there is less focus on how digital leaders can ensure inclusivity in digital education.

As highlighted by García and Kleifgen (2010), ensuring equal access to digital tools and learning opportunities is crucial, particularly for emergent bilinguals and marginalized communities. The digital divide remains a significant challenge, and digital leaders must actively work to create equitable learning environments that provide all students with the resources they need to succeed.

The concept of digital leadership is still evolving and requires further research to fully understand its application across diverse educational settings. While there is substantial evidence supporting its role in technology integration, professional development, and strategic planning, additional focus is needed on how digital leaders can foster community engagement and inclusivity in the digital age. Standardizing the concept and exploring its contextual applications will enable leaders to better address the unique needs of their schools and students in an increasingly digital world.



Conclusion:

This systematic review offers a thorough examination of the current landscape of research on digital leadership in education. The findings underscore the critical role of digital leadership in driving the digital transformation of schools, enhancing teaching practices, and supporting student learning outcomes.

As schools continue to integrate technology, digital leaders are pivotal in guiding educators through technological shifts and ensuring effective digital teaching practices. Despite the significant progress in this area, the review highlights the need for more research to establish standardized models of digital leadership that can be applied across diverse educational contexts.

Moreover, there is a notable gap in research exploring the role of digital leadership in fostering community engagement, inclusivity, and accessibility in digital learning environments. As educational systems become increasingly digital, it is crucial to examine how digital leaders can ensure equitable access to technology and learning opportunities, especially for underserved communities.

Future research should explore the perspectives of school leaders from various regions, cultures, and educational contexts to better understand the diverse challenges and opportunities digital leaders face. By broadening the scope of digital leadership studies, researchers can provide a more comprehensive and nuanced view of how leadership influences educational outcomes in the digital age. Ultimately, such research will help develop best practices and frameworks for digital leadership that promote inclusive, accessible, and effective educational environments for all students.

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