

Leadership Models in International Education: An Exploratory Systematic Review

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Abstract

This systematic review investigates evolving trends in leadership models within international education, focusing on adaptability to globalization, technological change, and accountability pressures. Analyzing 360 peer-reviewed studies published between 2013 and 2023 through bibliometric and thematic analysis, the study identifies transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership as dominant, together accounting for 75% of the literature. However, temporal analysis reveals significant shifts: distributed leadership has overtaken transformational as the most studied model in recent years (29% vs. 27%), while culturally responsive leadership more than doubled from 6% to 13%. Findings expose critical geographical imbalance (North America 32.8%, Europe 30.3%, Asia 21.7%, Africa 7.8%, Latin America 7.5%) and methodological skew toward qualitative approaches (50%). The study proposes the Tri-Dimensional Adaptive Leadership Model (TALM), integrating transformational vision, distributed collaboration, and cultural responsiveness as an integrative framework for international school leadership. Recommendations address policy, practice, and future research priorities including digital leadership, sustainability, geographical diversification, and leader wellbeing.

Keywords: *leadership models, international education, systematic literature review, distributed leadership, culturally responsive leadership, adaptive leadership*

1. Introduction

The 21st century has ushered in significant transformations within educational leadership, driven by globalization, technological advancement, demographic changes, and intensifying accountability pressures (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). In both developed and developing nations, schools increasingly compete on a global stage, with international assessments such as PISA serving as critical benchmarks for evaluating institutional effectiveness (Schleicher, 2019). International schools, characterized by cultural diversity, transnational mobility, and complex governance structures, have become key sites where leadership models are tested, adapted, and contested (Ainscow, 2023; Bunnell, 2021).

The integration of information technology has revolutionized educational delivery, transforming traditional pedagogical methods into more engaging and interactive experiences. Digital platforms enable real-time assessment, personalized learning, and global

collaboration, yet they also demand new leadership competencies (Rajeev Ranjan, 2023; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this digital transformation, thrusting school leadership into unprecedented territory as leaders navigated remote learning, community resilience, and wellbeing crises (Netolicky, 2020).

In this context of rapid change, effective school leadership has emerged as a crucial factor influencing a school's ability to adapt and thrive. Research consistently demonstrates that strong leadership is essential for fostering positive school culture, enhancing teacher effectiveness, and improving student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020; Day & Gu, 2021). The landscape of educational leadership encompasses diverse models: instructional leadership focuses on teaching quality; transformational leadership emphasizes inspiration and shared vision; distributed leadership recognizes collective responsibility across stakeholders (Hallinger, 2020; Spillane, 2015).

Despite recognition of leadership's critical importance, the field remains fragmented. Numerous leadership models have been proposed and studied, often in isolation from one another. Existing reviews tend to focus on specific models or broader theories without systematically analyzing how research focus has shifted over time in response to global changes (Hallinger, 2020; Neumerski, 2013). A significant gap exists in understanding which leadership models dominate contemporary discourse, how research trends have evolved, and what contextual factors shape these patterns.

This study addresses three research questions:

1. Which leadership models in education receive the most scholarly attention in contemporary research?
2. How have research trends on leadership models evolved over time, particularly in response to global and technological changes?
3. To what extent do contextual factors—such as globalization, technological innovation, and accountability pressures—influence research trends in leadership models?

2. Literature Review

The Concept of Leadership Models

Leadership models in education provide structured frameworks guiding how school leaders approach their roles, interact with stakeholders, and make critical decisions. The recent surge of interest reflects the need for leaders to adapt to increasingly complex environments influenced by globalization, technological innovation, and shifting accountability measures (Litz, 2021).

Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating staff, fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation (Leithwood & Azah, 2019). Transformational leaders articulate compelling visions, promote innovative practices, and provide individualized support. This model is associated with improved teacher performance and student outcomes, though critics note its potentially top-down, leader-centric orientation (Gumus et al., 2021).

Instructional leadership emphasizes direct leader involvement in teaching and learning processes, working closely with teachers to enhance instructional practices, curriculum development, and student assessment (Day & Sammons, 2016). This model ties leadership actions directly to academic performance but may neglect staff morale and community engagement.

Distributed leadership advocates shared leadership responsibilities across the institution, emphasizing collective responsibility rather than concentration in a single individual (Gumus et al., 2020; Harris, 2019). This model fosters collaboration and inclusivity but faces implementation challenges in hierarchical cultures.

Adaptive leadership emphasizes responsiveness to external pressures—globalization, technological disruption, evolving student needs—while maintaining internal coherence (Spulber, 2022). This model proved particularly relevant during COVID-19, when leaders rapidly transitioned to remote learning.

Culturally responsive leadership recognizes and responds to diverse cultural backgrounds of students and staff (Khalifa, 2018, 2022). Culturally responsive leaders prioritize understanding cultural dynamics, adapting practices to meet stakeholder needs, and creating inclusive environments where diversity is viewed as strength.

Global Practices and Regional Perspectives

Globally, educational leadership has shifted toward culturally adaptive and globally minded practices. Cosmopolitan leadership and culturally intelligent leadership prioritize cultural sensitivity and global thinking (Ang & Van Dyne, 2018; Earley & Ang, 2020). Transformational leadership remains widely adopted for its ability to unite diverse populations under shared vision (Duderstadt et al., 2020).

In Southeast Asia and Malaysia specifically, leadership reflects a blend of Western philosophies and Asian cultural values emphasizing collectivism, respect for authority, and social harmony (Aziz & Nor, 2021; Chen, 2021). The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 positions school leaders as central to reform, promoting transformational and distributed leadership as mechanisms for school improvement (Hashim & Razak, 2019; Zaid et al., 2018). Culturally responsive leadership is particularly important given Malaysia's multicultural heritage of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities.

Research Gaps

Several critical gaps persist in the literature. First, leadership research remains Western-centric, with most studies conducted in North America and Europe, limiting applicability to non-Western contexts (Lumby & Foskett, 2019; Oplatka, 2020). Second, there is a lack of longitudinal studies tracking long-term leadership impact on school outcomes (Robinson et al., 2020; Sun & Leithwood, 2020). Third, research on digital leadership remains limited despite technology's transformative role (Anderson & Dexter, 2020; Hussin, 2021). Fourth, the unique contextual challenges of international schools—cultural diversity, staff mobility, multiple accountability frameworks—remain underexplored (Bunnell, 2021; Savva, 2021).

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) following PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), integrating bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer and CiteSpace (van Eck & Waltman, 2017) and thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

Search Strategy and Selection

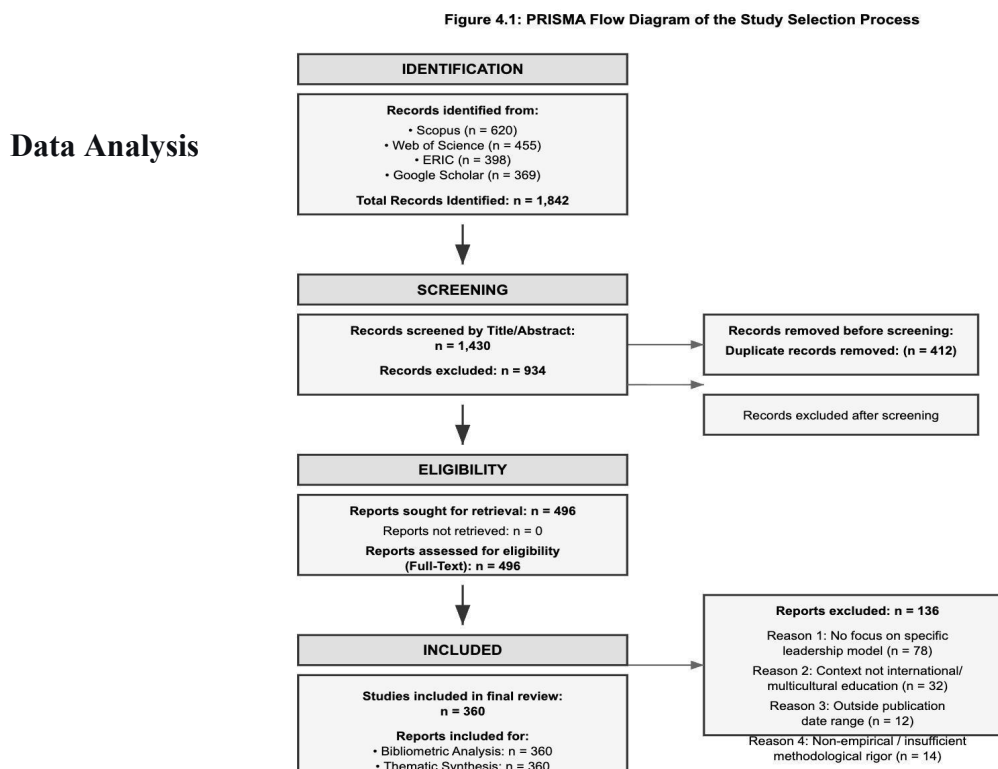
Four databases were searched: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 2013 to 2023. The search strategy combined three concept groups using Boolean operators: (1) leadership terms ("educational leadership," "school leadership," "principal"); (2) model terms ("transformational leadership," "distributed leadership," "instructional leadership," "model," "framework"); and (3) context terms ("international education," "international school," "global," "transnational").

Inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed journal articles or conference proceedings; English language; published 2013–2023; explicit focus on leadership models in international, multicultural, or comparative education contexts.

Exclusion criteria: books, book reviews, dissertations, opinion pieces; publications before 2013; leadership in purely national contexts without international dimensions; leadership in non-educational sectors.

The initial search yielded 1,842 records. After duplicate removal (412), title and abstract screening (934 excluded), and full-text review (496 to 360), **360 studies** were retained for final analysis.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram (adapted from Page et al., 2021)



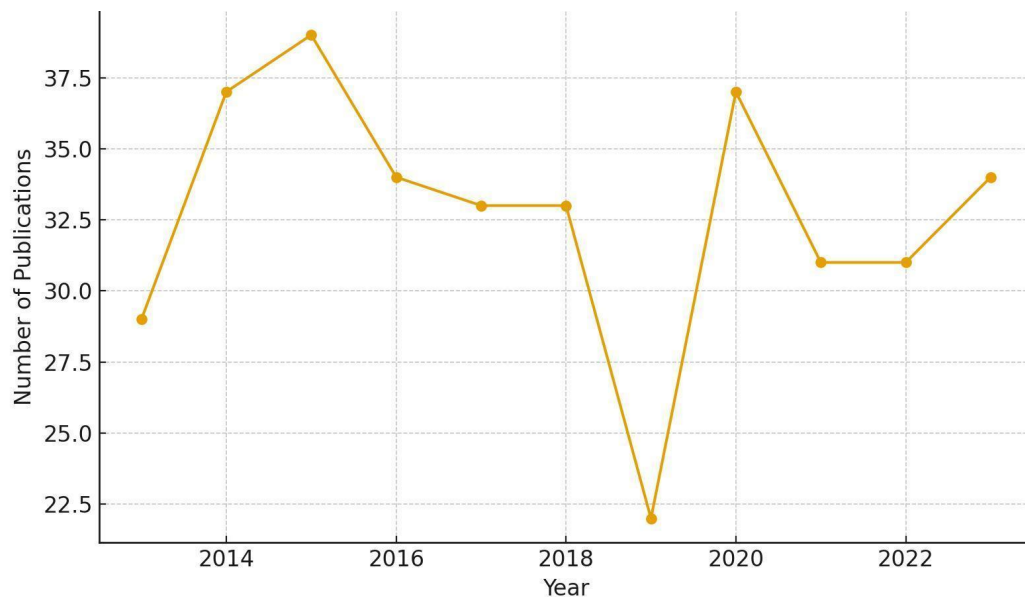
Bibliometric analysis examined citation patterns, publication trends, keyword co-occurrence, and collaboration networks. Thematic analysis followed six phases: familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme review, theme definition, and report production. Quality appraisal used CASP checklists, with studies flagged as "low-rigor" interpreted cautiously rather than excluded.

4. Findings

Descriptive Overview of the Literature Corpus

Annual publication trends revealed a mean of 33 studies per year, with notable fluctuations. Early peaks occurred in 2014 (37 publications) and 2015 (39 publications). A sharp decline appeared in 2019 (22 publications), followed by a resurgence in 2020 (37 publications), plausibly linked to COVID-19's impact on leadership discourse (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Figure 2: Annual Publication Trend (2013–2023)



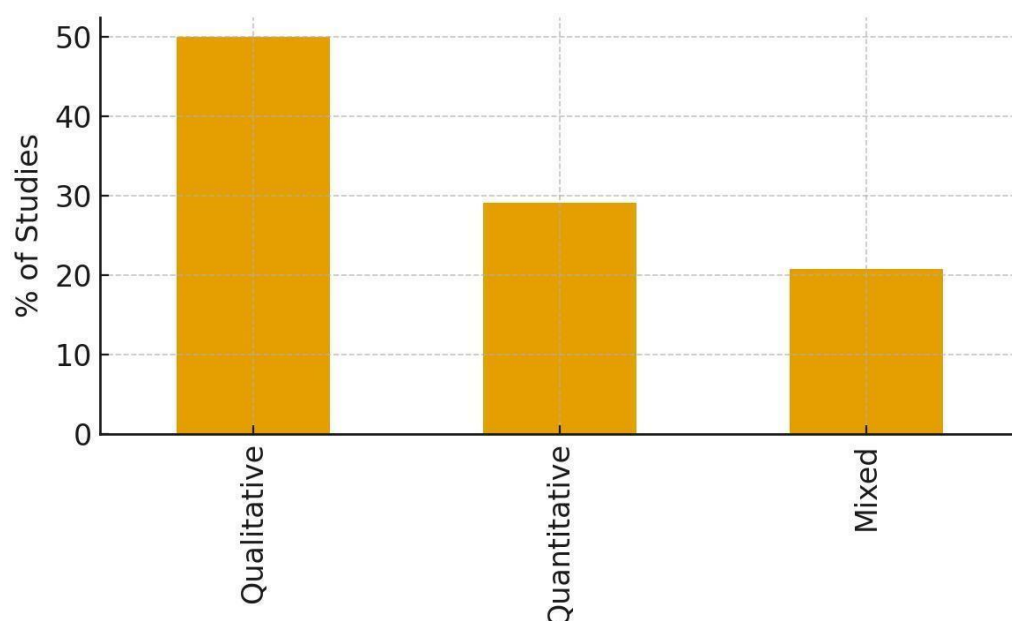
Geographical distribution showed significant imbalance. North America contributed 32.8% of studies, Europe 30.3%, Asia 21.7%, Africa 7.8%, and Latin America 7.5%. This pattern reflects broader structural inequalities in global research production, where Global North scholars have greater access to funding, high-impact journals, and research infrastructure (Crossley & Watson, 2020).

Table 1: Distribution of Studies by Region

Region	Percentage	Cumulative
North America	32.8%	32.8%
Europe	30.3%	63.1%
Asia	21.7%	84.8%
Africa	7.8%	92.6%
Latin America	7.5%	100.1%

Methodological orientations revealed a clear preference for qualitative paradigms. Qualitative approaches accounted for 50% of studies (case studies, interviews, ethnographic observations). Quantitative methods represented 29.2% (surveys, statistical modeling). Mixed-methods designs represented 20.8%, reflecting growing recognition of methodological pluralism.

Figure 3: Distribution of Research Methods



Leading publication outlets showed concentration within specialized journals. The top five journals—Leadership and Policy in Schools, Educational Review, Compare, International Journal of Educational Management, and School Leadership & Management—accounted for 47.2% of all publications.

Table 2: Leading Journals by Publication Count

Journal	Articles	Primary Database
Leadership and Policy in Schools	50	Web of Science, Scopus
Educational Review	49	Scopus, ERIC
Compare	49	Web of Science, Scopus
International Journal of Educational Management	48	Scopus, Web of Science
School Leadership & Management	43	ERIC, Google Scholar

Bibliometric Analysis Findings

Citation analysis identified the most influential works. The most cited study was a 2021 European qualitative investigation on culturally responsive leadership (138 citations), reflecting heightened engagement with diversity, equity, and inclusion (Khalifa, 2022; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2022). Other highly cited works included a 2015 European study on servant leadership (135 citations) and a 2020 African study on instructional leadership (133 citations).

Keyword co-occurrence analysis using VOSviewer identified four distinct clusters:

Cluster 1 (Transformational Leadership and Technology Integration): Connects visionary, change-oriented leadership with digital learning, innovation, and organizational change. Its prominence reflects how transformational leadership has been reframed during digital transformation and post-pandemic recovery (Netolicky, 2020).

Cluster 2 (Distributed Leadership and Accountability): Links shared leadership approaches with educational reform, performance metrics, and stakeholder pressures. Distributed leadership is positioned as a strategy for meeting intensifying accountability demands (Baker et al., 2020; Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016).

Cluster 3 (Instructional Leadership and Student Outcomes): Represents research directly tying leadership practices to teaching quality, curriculum implementation, and student achievement, reflecting the enduring influence of accountability frameworks (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Cluster 4 (Culturally Responsive Leadership): Emphasizes leadership practices informed by equity, diversity, inclusion, and global citizenship. Its rapid growth signals the influence of globalization and social justice movements on leadership discourse (Khalifa, 2022).

Figure 4: Keyword Co-occurrence Clusters



Dominant Leadership Models

Transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership together accounted for approximately 75% of all studies. Transformational leadership was the single most frequently examined model (30%), followed by distributed leadership (25%) and instructional leadership (20%).

Table 3: Evolution of Leadership Models (2013–2017 vs. 2018–2023)

Model	2013–2017 (%)	2018–2023 (%)	Absolute Change
Transformational	33	27	-6
Distributed	20	29	+9
Instructional	25	18	-7
Servant	12	8	-4
Culturally Responsive	6	13	+7
Other	4	5	+1

Key shifts: Distributed leadership overtook transformational as the most studied model in the later period (29% vs. 27%). Culturally responsive leadership more than doubled from 6% to 13%, reflecting global equity movements. Servant and instructional leadership declined in relative focus.

Influence of Contextual Factors

Thematic synthesis identified three contextual factors as critical drivers shaping leadership research:

Globalization has fueled the prominence of culturally responsive leadership by foregrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion as core leadership imperatives. Leaders are expected to prepare students for a globalized society while navigating cross-cultural complexities (Harris & Jones, 2020; Khalifa, 2022).

Technological change has reinforced the role of leaders as facilitators of digital integration. Studies highlight leaders' responsibilities in providing professional development, resourcing digital infrastructure, and cultivating cultures of innovation (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2018; Netolicky, 2020).

Accountability pressures have driven interest in distributed leadership as a mechanism for shared responsibility and data-driven decision-making. Accountability frameworks link to reform agendas pushing leaders to balance compliance with innovation (Baker et al., 2020; Pont, 2020).

Table 4: Contextual Themes and Evidence

Theme	Example Evidence
Globalization	Promotion of inclusive, culturally responsive leadership to address diverse student needs (Harris & Jones, 2020)
Technology	Emphasis on leadership enabling digital integration and innovation (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2018)
Accountability	Advocacy for collective, data-driven leadership models responding to performance-based regimes (Baker et al., 2020)

5. Discussion

Interpretation of Key Findings

The persistence of transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership reflects the resilience of conceptual frameworks deeply embedded in scholarly and policy discourses. However, their shifting proportions indicate evolving priorities. Distributed leadership's rise from 20% to 29%—overtaking transformational leadership—aligns with post-pandemic recognition that collaborative, networked leadership is essential for navigating complex, rapidly changing environments (Harris & Jones, 2020). The limitations of "heroic," leader-centric models have become increasingly apparent (Gumus et al., 2021).

Culturally responsive leadership's surge from 6% to 13% reflects global movements for equity, inclusion, and decolonization in education (Smith, 2021). In international schools, where classrooms are microcosms of global diversity, CRL provides a crucial framework for navigating difference and promoting belonging (Khalifa, 2022; Santamaria & Santamaria,

2022). This growth signals broader epistemic rebalancing, as alternative epistemologies from Global South contexts begin reshaping dominant discourse (Crossley & Watson, 2020).

The geographical imbalance (Global North 63%) risks universalizing Western-centric models to contexts where collectivist values, respect for hierarchy, and community-based decision-making dominate (Oplatka, 2020; Chen & Gu, 2021). Leadership theories developed in individualist Western contexts may not be directly applicable or effective in Asian, African, or Latin American education systems without cultural adaptation.

The methodological skew toward qualitative approaches (50%) provides depth, contextual richness, and narrative power—which may explain why qualitative studies dominate the most-cited list. However, over-reliance on small-scale qualitative designs limits generalizability and the ability to establish causal relationships between leadership models and outcomes (Gorard, 2022). More longitudinal and mixed-methods research is urgently needed.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Three cross-cutting themes emerge from the synthesis. First, **hybridization of leadership models** reflects recognition that no single paradigm is sufficient. Effective leaders draw simultaneously on transformational, distributed, instructional, and culturally responsive practices depending on context (Harris & Jones, 2020; Ainscow, 2023).

Second, **equity and digitalization as dual imperatives** are reshaping leadership agendas. Leaders must harness technology to expand access while addressing digital divides that risk exacerbating inequality. The intersection of these imperatives creates both opportunities and tensions (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2018; Netolicky, 2020).

Third, **complexity of accountability** permeates leadership models differently across contexts. Distributed leadership is often justified as an accountability strategy, instructional leadership links to measurable outcomes, and transformational leadership mobilizes commitment to reform agendas. However, accountability pressures often conflict with equity and innovation (Gorard, 2022).

The Tri-Dimensional Adaptive Leadership Model (TALM)

Based on the synthesis of findings, this study proposes the **Tri-Dimensional Adaptive Leadership Model (TALM)**, an integrative framework that synthesizes transformational, distributed, and culturally responsive leadership paradigms into a cohesive, future-oriented conceptual tool.

Figure 5: The Tri-Dimensional Adaptive Leadership Model (conceptual diagram)

The TALM is organized around three interdependent dimensions:

Dimension 1: Transformational Vision (Strategic Orientation)

Anchored in the capacity to articulate vision, inspire commitment, and mobilize stakeholders toward shared goals. In international contexts, transformational vision aligns diverse cultural expectations with institutional missions. This dimension draws on Leithwood et al. (2020) and Duderstadt et al. (2020).

Dimension 2: Distributed Collaboration (Operational Orientation)

Reflects recognition that leadership is collective practice spread across multiple actors. Distributed collaboration is not delegation but intentional cultivation of shared agency through professional learning communities, collaborative decision-making, and peer mentoring (Ng, 2021; Harris, 2019).

Dimension 3: Cultural Responsiveness (Ethical Orientation)

Positions inclusivity, equity, and diversity as foundational to leadership rather than secondary considerations. Goes beyond symbolic multiculturalism to include structural changes: inclusive curricula, anti-racist practices, and student voice mechanisms (Khalifa, 2022; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2022).

Table 5: Dimensions of the Tri-Dimensional Adaptive Leadership Model

Dimension	Orientation	Core Function	Key Scholars
Transformational Vision	Strategic	Articulate vision, inspire commitment, mobilize stakeholders	Leithwood et al., 2020; Duderstadt et al., 2020
Distributed Collaboration	Operational	Cultivate shared agency, professional learning communities, collective decision-making	Harris, 2019; Ng, 2021; Spillane, 2015
Cultural Responsiveness	Ethical	Embed equity, inclusion, diversity as foundational leadership imperatives	Khalifa, 2022; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2022

Adaptive Integration: The Dynamic Core of the Model

The defining feature of TALM is its adaptive orientation. Unlike earlier models emphasizing fixed traits or stable practices, TALM frames leadership as dynamic integration in response to shifting contexts. In crisis situations (e.g., COVID-19), leaders may foreground transformational vision to sustain morale while relying on distributed collaboration for operational complexity (Harris & Jones, 2020). In culturally diverse contexts, leaders may emphasize cultural responsiveness as the guiding principle while aligning transformational goals with equity agendas (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2022). In digital innovation initiatives, leaders balance vision-driven technological adoption with distributed professional development (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2018).

This adaptability aligns with complexity theory in educational leadership, which posits that effective leadership emerges from continuous interaction with dynamic systems rather than static adherence to prescriptive models (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Practical Applications of TALM

The TALM offers several practical applications. For leaders in practice, the model serves as a reflective framework to assess whether current practices overemphasize one dimension at the expense of others. For policymakers, TALM provides a tool for designing balanced leadership standards that go beyond managerial or outcome-driven metrics. For professional development, TALM can structure leadership training curricula, with modules organized around visioning, collaboration, and responsiveness.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

For policy: Integrate equity and digital readiness into leadership standards; move away from rigid accountability toward balanced approaches combining quality assurance with innovation; create platforms for South-North knowledge exchange to avoid reproducing epistemic inequities.

For practice: Develop adaptive leadership repertoires beyond single-model training; embed equity audits into leadership routines; embrace digital cultures of innovation; prioritize leader and teacher wellbeing as integral to sustaining effective leadership (Day & Gu, 2021).

For research: Expand geographical scope and epistemic diversity beyond Global North dominance; advance digital leadership scholarship examining AI, learning analytics, and ethical dimensions; integrate sustainability and social justice into leadership studies; conduct longitudinal research tracking leadership impact over time.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on published academic literature may overlook valuable unpublished research, including conference presentations and dissertations (publication bias). The selection of specific databases may influence literature capture. Language restrictions (English-only) exclude important research conducted in other languages, limiting generalizability, particularly for Global South contexts where research is often published in local languages. The analysis of contextual factors relying predominantly on bibliometric methods may not fully capture complexities of how external factors shape leadership research.

6. Conclusion

This systematic review of 360 studies published between 2013 and 2023 reveals that educational leadership research is simultaneously stable and shifting. Transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership remain dominant, together accounting for 75% of the literature. However, significant temporal shifts have occurred: distributed leadership has overtaken transformational as the most studied model (29% vs. 27%), while culturally responsive leadership has more than doubled (6% to 13%), reflecting global equity movements and decolonization agendas.

Critical imbalances persist. Geographical distribution remains heavily skewed toward North America (32.8%) and Europe (30.3%), with Africa (7.8%) and Latin America (7.5%) significantly underrepresented. Methodological orientation favors qualitative approaches (50%), limiting generalizability. These patterns risk universalizing Western-centric models to contexts where collectivist values and different cultural norms dominate.

The proposed Tri-Dimensional Adaptive Leadership Model (TALM) synthesizes transformational vision, distributed collaboration, and cultural responsiveness into an integrative framework for international school leadership. TALM's adaptive orientation enables leaders to shift dimensional emphasis based on context—crisis situations may

foreground transformational vision; diverse cultural contexts may elevate cultural responsiveness; reform environments may emphasize distributed collaboration.

Future research must prioritize geographical diversification, digital leadership, sustainability, and leader wellbeing to ensure leadership scholarship remains relevant, inclusive, and impactful. The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the future of leadership research is not about discovering the next "best" model in isolation, but about cultivating leaders and systems capable of navigating complexity through equity, adaptability, and shared responsibility.

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