

Crucial leadership competencies of school heads in effective school management: a comprehensive systematic review

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the essential leadership competencies of school heads required for effective school management. The article provides a comprehensive overview of leadership competencies as a key supporter in enhancing effective school management. This study used preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) approach by analyzing 756 publications from 2019 to 2023 through the Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Eric databases. The data were collected, reviewed, and underwent a peer-review process before a systematic literature review. The expected results uncovering a set of crucial leadership competencies that are paramount in navigating the multifaceted responsibilities of school heads. These competencies encompass strategic vision, effective communication, adept decision-making, team collaboration, and adaptability to dynamic educational landscapes. The final finding data is (n=31) which review identified key themes including the leadership competencies and the roles of school heads in effective school management. The findings are divided into three themes which is: i) principals' leadership and professional development, ii) challenges and coping strategies in school leadership, and iii) leadership styles and cultural considerations. In conclusion, this article indicates the significance of leadership competencies in the effective management of schools. The insights derived from this research serve as a valuable resource for teachers, school heads, and policymakers aiming to elevate the quality of education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of education, the role of a school head transcends traditional boundaries, evolving into a multifaceted position that requires a set of leadership competencies [1], [2]. As we stand at the crossroads of educational reform and innovation, it becomes imperative to scrutinize and understand the key competencies that school heads must possess to navigate the complex terrain of modern school management successfully [3]. A school head's leadership is essential to establishing the culture of the organization, creating a favorable learning environment, and directing team members' efforts towards academic success [4]. This influential piece explores the complex network of competencies required of school heads, illuminating the abilities, characteristics, and domains of knowledge that characterize successful leadership in the field of education.

First and foremost, the article explores the critical importance of visionary leadership. School heads are tasked with not only envisioning the future trajectory of the school but also inspiring stakeholders to rally behind a shared vision. Through adept strategic planning, a school head must navigate the educational landscape and aligning institutional goals with the evolving needs of students, teachers, and the broader community. Furthermore, the article explores the interpersonal competencies that are integral to effective school management. A school head's competency to communicate, collaborate, and build relationships within and beyond the school community significantly influences the institution's overall success [5]. The intricate balance between empathy and authority, diplomacy, and decisiveness, becomes paramount in fostering a positive school climate and ensuring effective communication channels [6].

In addition, the article emphasizes the necessity of instructional leadership in the range of a school head [7], [8]. Beyond administrative prowess, the competency to guide and support teachers in their pedagogical practices is central to driving academic achievement. This includes a deep understanding of curriculum development, assessment strategies, and the latest educational technologies, ensuring that the school remains at the forefront of educational innovation. As we embark on this exploration of school head leadership competencies, we contribute to the ongoing discourse on educational leadership, paving the way for informed practices that empower school heads to lead with excellence and foster thriving learning environments [9], [10].

In summary, the literature suggests that effective school management requires school heads to possess a diverse range of competencies, including but not limited to instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and collaborative skills [11]. These competencies are crucial for creating a positive school climate, driving instructional improvement, and ultimately enhancing student achievement [12]. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of school leadership and the need for school heads to continuously develop and refine their competencies to meet the complex demands of educational leaderships. To guarantee that school head leadership competencies realize the potential as a catalyst for effective school management, policy makers and school head must work together to address these issues, therefore, through exploration and understanding of various research perspectives, this study aims to answer three main research questions (RQ) as follows:

- i) RQ1. How do principals' participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) influence their leadership competencies and the effectiveness of educational reforms at their schools?
- ii) RQ2. What coping strategies are most effective for school leaders in managing the dual challenges of digital transformation and crisis leadership during periods of significant educational disruption?
- iii) RQ3. How do principals' leadership styles interact with different cultural contexts to affect teacher satisfaction and student academic achievement in multicultural school settings?

The connection between the issues presented here is still weak from a conceptual perspective; therefore, through exploration and understanding of various research perspectives, this study aims to analyzed research evidence on this topic by conducting a bibliometric analysis of 756 English-language publications from 2019 to 2023 taken from the Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Eric databases. The purpose of this analysis is to deeply understand the patterns, methodologies, theoretical foundations, leading journals, leading countries, and specific topics in this field of research [13]. This research examines a collection of studies on leadership competencies to enhance effective school management.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

The preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) publication standard is explained by the authors at the beginning of this section. Subsequently, the authors discuss how the research questions were formulated, the systematic searching techniques they used (identification, screening, and eligibility), how to evaluate their quality, and how to extract and analyze data. Following this approach provides a structured methodology that minimizes bias and improves the credibility of the findings.

2.1. Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses

PRISMA was the publishing standard that guided this systematic study. PRISMA assists researchers in formulating study questions that enable systematic review, defining inclusion and exclusion criteria, and attempting to sort through a substantial volume of scientific literature within a given timeframe [14]. In this case, PRISMA guided the authors' thorough word searches on school heads' leadership competencies. They then classified the information for use in effective school management.

2.2. Systematic searching strategy

Three systematic processes of eligibility, screening, and identification were implemented to retrieve relevant articles from the selected databases. The eligibility process involved setting inclusion and exclusion criteria to filter the initial pool of articles. Screening was then conducted to assess the abstracts and titles for

relevance, followed by a thorough identification phase where the full texts of the remaining articles were reviewed to ensure they met all necessary criteria.

2.2.1. Identification

The process of identification is utilized to improve the main keywords. This is important since the identifying procedure raises the possibility that more relevant articles will be found for the review [14]. Once a few keywords have been selected, related terms are found utilizing thesaurus, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and previous research. All relevant terms were selected after the search strings for the Scopus, WoS, and Eric databases were created, as show in Table 1. During the first stage of the systematic review method, 756 publications were successfully extracted from the databases for the current research.

2.2.2. Screening

The purpose of the screening procedure is to make sure that the materials being gathered for possible relevant study are suitable for the research topic or topics that have been selected. During the screening process, a frequently used content-related criterion is classifying research items based on the leadership competencies of school heads in effective school management. All duplicate papers will be eliminated from the list of papers that were searched during this phase. Following the investigation's exclusion and inclusion criteria, 113 publications were left for examination in the second screening stage (refer to Table 2) after 643 publications were discarded in the first stage of screening. Before applying any other criterion, this one was chosen because research publications are the primary source of helpful advice. It also includes meta-synthesis, book analyses, book series, and book reviews.

2.2.3. Eligibility

There are 95 items ready for the eligibility phase, which is the third step. At this phase, the titles and main points of each article were carefully examined to make sure the articles met the inclusion requirements and the goals of the current study. 64 articles were therefore eliminated because they were either out of field, their full text access articles were not substantiated by empirical data, or their titles had no bearing on the purpose of the study. At last, 31 articles are accessible for examination, as shown in Figure 1.

Table 1. The search string used for the systematic review process

Database	Search string
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("Leadership Competencies" OR "Leadership Skills") AND ("School Heads" OR "Principals" OR "Headmaster") AND "School") AND PUBYEAR > 2018 AND PUBYEAR < 2024 AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE , "final"))
WoS	("Leadership Competencies" OR "Leadership Skills") AND ("School Heads" OR "Principals" OR "Headmaster") AND "School" (TOPIC)
Eric	("Leadership Competencies" OR "Leadership Skills") AND ("School Heads" OR "Principals" OR "Headmaster") AND "School"

Table 2. The inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	Between 2019-2023	2018 and earlier
Literature type	Journal (research article)	Journals (systematic review), book series, book, chapter in book, and conference proceeding
Publication stage	Final	In press

2.3. Appraisal of quality

Due to the mixed study designs (qualitative+quantitative+mixed methods) that formed the basis of the review, the quality of the chosen articles was assessed using the mixed method appraisal tool (MMAT) version 2018 [15]. A pair of reviewers was tasked with evaluating the quality of the articles selected by considering factors such as the suitability of the statistical technique employed to accomplish the goal, the clarity of the research questions, and the degree of confidence in the assessment of the research question. The reviewers also looked at how the data were interpreted in the papers and how the findings were presented, debated, and concluded. The quality was determined using the MMAT standards; 25% of the articles were rated as low-quality, 50% as medium, 75% as above average, and 100% as high-quality. The seven articles were above average, and the reviewers classified the remaining 24 as high average quality. Then, 24 papers were classified by the reviewers as being of high average quality, and the remaining seven as being above average.

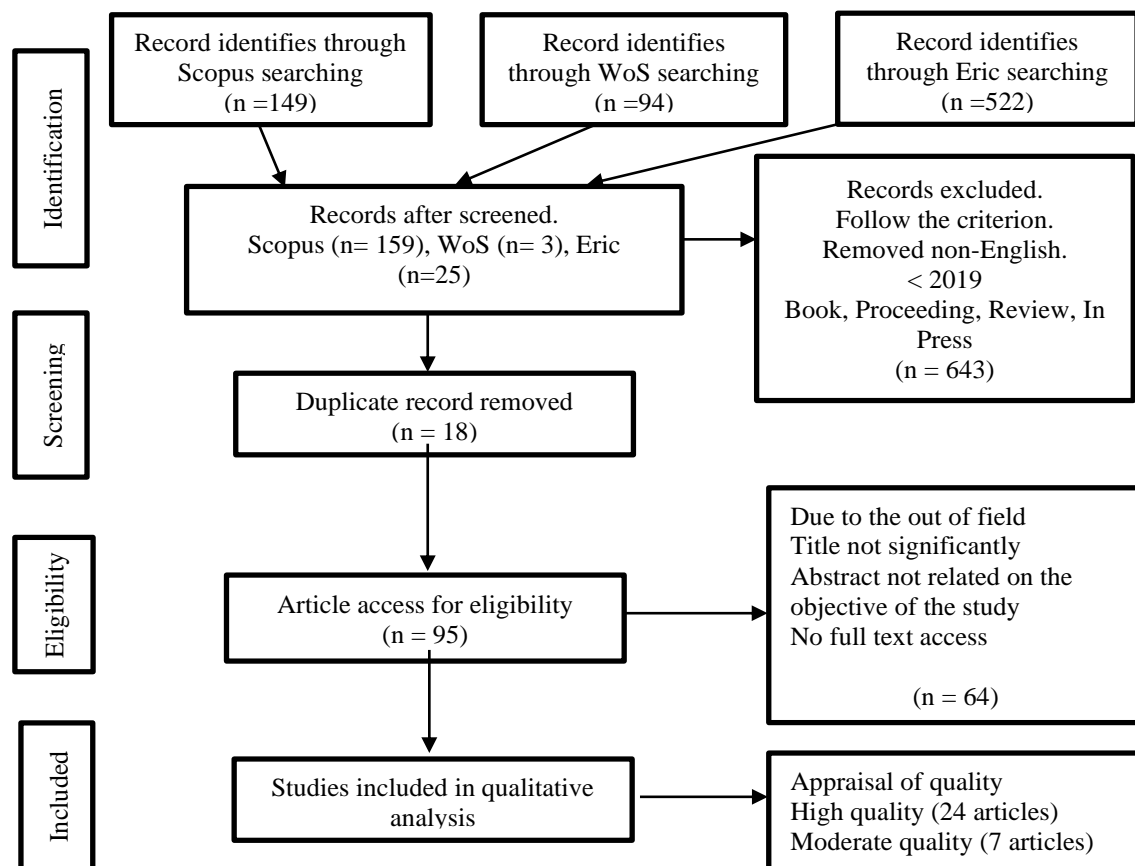


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the proposed searching study [16]

2.4. Data abstraction and analysis

One of the evaluation strategies used in this study was an integrative analysis, which used quantitative techniques to examine and combine different research types. The main objective was to carry out a competent analysis with the intention of determining relevant subjects and subtopics. The theme development process began with the first round of data collection. The authors' thorough analysis, which involved a methodical review of 31 publications to extract statements or content pertinent to the study's key areas, is depicted in Figure 1. The authors then evaluated the significant research on school heads' leadership competencies in effective school management.

The methods and research findings of each study are now examined in this part. Subsequently, the author collaborated with fellow authors to construct themes that drew upon specific elements peculiar to the research context. A log was kept during the data analysis process to document analyses, recommendations, difficulties, and any other thoughts pertinent to the data interpretation. The authors cross-referenced the outcomes of the preceding step in order to search for any variations in the topic development process. It is important to highlight that in the presence of disagreements between concepts, the authors engaged in internal discussions to resolve them. The produced themes underwent refinement to ensure coherence. To validate the rigor of the analysis, two experts in educational management and leadership were involved in the selection process, contributing to the verification of the problems. The expert review phase was instrumental in establishing the domain validity, ensuring clarity, significance, and appropriateness of each subtheme.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The review resulted in the identification of three main themes related to leadership competencies of school heads in effective school management. The three main themes were in Table 3, principals' leadership and professional development, challenges and coping strategies in school leadership, and leadership styles and cultural considerations. The three main themes that were identified from the 31 articles in this research are summarized in Table 3 [17]–[47].

3.1. General background of the selected studies

Regarding the topic of the selected research, six studies examined the leadership competencies of American school heads in managing effective school management [24], [27]–[29], [41], [47], five studies concentrated on Africa [18], [20], [30], [31], [34], three studies on Malaysia [38], [40], [45], two studies on Philippines [19], [23], two studies on Indonesia [36], [42], two studies on Australia [26], [39], two studies on Turkey [25], [33], one study on Norway [21], one study on Israel [22], one study on Vietnam [32], one study on Estonia [35], one study on Austria [37], one study on Portugal [43], and one study on Kazakhstan [46]. Moreover, there were 11 quantitative research studies, 17 qualitative research studies, and three mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) studies selected for the review.

Table 3. A simplified table of studies included in the systematic review

No.	Authors	Title
Theme 1: principals' leadership and professional development		
1	Galdames-Calderón [17]	Distributed leadership: school principals' practices to promote teachers' professional development for school improvement
2	So-Oabeb and du Plessis [18]	Leadership competencies for teacher professional development: perspectives of Namibian principals, heads of departments and teachers
3	Cabreros [19]	21st century instructional leadership and strategic management of technical vocational education and training programs
4	Ralebese <i>et al.</i> [20]	"Underprepared" principals leading curriculum reform in Lesotho
5	Strand and Emstad [21]	Developing leadership by participating in principal professional learning communities (PPLCS) and the added value of transnational collaboration
6	Avidov-Ungar and Zion [22]	The characteristics and perceptions of teachers engaged in leading professional communities
7	Brooks and Brooks [23]	Culturally (ir)relevant school leadership: ethno-religious conflict and school administration in the Philippines
8	Sebastian <i>et al.</i> [24]	Principal leadership and school performance: an examination of instructional leadership and organizational management
Theme 2: challenges and coping strategies in school leadership		
1	Arastaman and Çetinkaya [25]	Stressors faced by principals, ways of coping with stress and leadership experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic
2	Watson and Singh [26]	Support mechanisms utilized by educational leaders during COVID-19: experiences from the Western Australian public education school sector
3	Gonzales <i>et al.</i> [27]	Implementing school improvement plans: perceptions and implications of aspiring principals for educational leadership programs
4	Clark and Chrispeels [28]	Using multiple leadership frames to understand how two school principals are influencing teachers' practices and achievement of Hispanic English learners
5	Clark [29]	Supporting music education in elementary schools in a low-income rural area
6	Mestry and Govindasamy [30]	The perceptions of school management teams and teachers of the principal's instructional leadership role in managing curriculum changes
7	Jaca [31]	The challenges of transitioning from teacher to departmental head in seven primary schools
8	Yen <i>et al.</i> [32]	Factors affecting smart school leadership competencies of high school principals in Vietnam
9	Karakose <i>et al.</i> [33]	Examining teachers' perspectives on school principals' digital leadership roles and technology capabilities during the covid-19 pandemic
10	de Bruyn and Mestry [34]	Voices of resilience: female school principals, leadership skills, and decision-making techniques
Theme 3: leadership styles and cultural considerations		
1	Tamkivi and Eisenschmidt [35]	What matters in leadership practices among Estonian upper secondary school principals?
2	Subaidi <i>et al.</i> [36]	Visionary leadership in improving the quality and competitiveness of private Islamic primary schools
3	Kemethofer <i>et al.</i> [37]	Examining the trident: how data from the PISA study can be used to identify associations among context, school leadership, and student outcomes
4	Mohamed and Abidin [38]	Principals' communication styles and school culture in vocational colleges in Selangor
5	Simon <i>et al.</i> [39]	Leading pedagogical reform: Australian principals tell their stories
6	Halim <i>et al.</i> [40]	Job satisfaction as a mediator between leadership styles and organizational commitment of teachers in Malaysia
7	Hodge <i>et al.</i> [41]	Principal leadership style and persona in Florida secondary education
8	Budiman [42]	Contribution of a school principal's leadership competencies and compensation for the performance of teachers in state high schools in Bandung, Indonesia
9	Cunha <i>et al.</i> [43]	Portuguese principals' professional development needs and preferred learning methods
10	Plaatjies [44]	Perceptions of foundation phase teachers on principals as literacy leaders in selected primary schools
11	Tai and Kareem [45]	The relationship between emotional intelligence of school principals in managing change and teacher attitudes towards change
12	Želvyš and Esenova [46]	Mapping priority areas for the development of leadership competencies of school principals
13	DiGaudio and Bickmore [47]	Middle grades principal credentialing: a vanishing requirement

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Principals' leadership and professional development

The study explores the role of principal management in school organization, coexistence, teacher leader participation, and professional capacity development. It reveals that school heads need various competencies to support teachers' professional development, including accountability, effective communication, and listening skills [18]. The research suggests that principals and heads of departments (HODs) can promote teacher professional development using these competencies. The study also highlights the importance of principals participating in PLCs to improve their leadership competencies and understanding of curriculum reform [21], [22]. To effectively support professional development, principals can take specific actions such as facilitating regular PLC meetings where teachers collaborate on curriculum planning and share best practices. Encouraging reflective practice and providing opportunities for peer observation and feedback can enhance teaching skills and professional growth. Additionally, principals can allocate resources for continuous learning, such as professional development workshops and courses tailored to the specific needs of their staff. The report also emphasizes the importance of professional development programs and good principal preparation that incorporate multicultural awareness, reflective practice, and culturally appropriate leadership skills.

According to Zhang *et al.* [48], good principal leadership in professional development involves more than just formal programs, rather, it involves regular, unstructured interactions that promote a culture of constant learning, and adaptation. To not only reach but also surpass the constantly changing criteria of educational excellence, principals must, in their capacity as leaders, negotiate the intricate relationship between educational policies and the realities of the classroom. This calls for a dynamic style of leadership that emphasizes creative problem-solving and critical thinking [49]. Furthermore, research indicates that principals who actively pursue their own professional development, especially through interdisciplinary learning and collaboration, greatly improve their capacity to set an example for others to follow, encouraging both staff and students to be resilient and curious about the classroom [21].

3.2.2. Challenges and coping strategies in school leadership

The study reveals that principals' leadership styles reflect their stress levels during the pandemic and self-care is crucial for successful crisis leadership [25]. The research highlights the importance of involving participants in school development plans, building connections, and understanding data-driven decisions. Effective leadership strategies enhance teacher proficiency and student engagement, and cultural sensitivity is essential. The study also highlights the benefits of music in the classroom and the importance of fostering a culture of collaboration among staff members [29]. To address these challenges, principals can implement strategies such as establishing support networks for teachers to share coping strategies and resources. Encouraging open communication and providing mental health resources can help manage stress levels among staff. Additionally, principals should model self-care practices and resilience, demonstrating the importance of maintaining personal well-being to their teams. The transition from teacher to director of education faces challenges such as shifts in attitudes, lack of leadership and management skills, and time constraints. The study highlights the interdependence of individual, school, and educational community-level factors on smart school leadership competencies, with smart school development policies and innovative facilities and infrastructure being crucial [32]. The study also highlights the importance of digital technology usage, support for digital transformation, and digital leadership skills.

Further research show that educational leaders frequently encounter unforeseen difficulties that need for a high level of emotional intelligence in addition to technical expertise [50]. A leader's efficacy can be strongly impacted by their capacity to control their own emotions as well as the emotional environment of the school, especially during times of crisis or significant change. Emotionally intelligent leaders are more likely to employ healthy coping mechanisms that maintain student morale and academic output. Additionally, networks of support that transcend the school setting, such as the district, state, and international educational communities, that offer more resources and perspectives help school leaders become more resilient [51].

3.2.3. Leadership styles and cultural considerations

The study found that principals adhered to successful leadership methods, including developing relationships with teachers and students. However, the workload of teachers was a major concern in their work due to challenges related to school reform. Principals recognized the benefits of being part of the state's upper secondary school network and having a reliable connection with the operator. The study also highlighted the importance of context-sensitive leadership abilities and the need for better leadership qualities [36]. Principals can adopt leadership styles that are responsive to cultural contexts by engaging in continuous cultural competence training and developing an understanding of the cultural backgrounds of their students and staff. This can include implementing culturally relevant curricula and practices that acknowledge and celebrate diversity. It was found that reading competency achievement was higher in school settings where principals had more authority [44]. Principals discussed how they led the reform and recommended more

regional assistance, education, and leadership skill development. Job satisfaction was found to be a mediating factor between transactional leadership and organizational commitment, with highly satisfied teachers attributing their dedication to their school to this leadership style [40]. The study also revealed that teachers have divergent opinions about their principals' role as literacy leaders, highlighting the need for subject-specific leadership in general and literacy in particular. Principals also showed a lack of expertise in motivation and leadership, placing less emphasis on relationships with outside partners, financial management, and human resource management [45], [46].

Research indicates that cultural circumstances have a major impact on leadership styles, influencing how leaders resolve conflicts, collaborate, and communicate [52]. A school head in a multicultural situation can be significantly increased by having a thorough awareness of cultural dimensions such as uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and individualism versus collectivism. With the use of this cultural competency, school heads may create and put into action plans that honor various customs and traditions while also raising student achievement and teacher satisfaction [53]. Additionally, flexible school heads are more likely to create an inclusive school climate that celebrates diversity and uses it to its advantage, improving student achievement and community involvement.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic review emphasizes how school heads can improve the efficacy of school management through the development of essential leadership competencies. In addition to fostering accountability, effective communication, and listening skills, school heads play a crucial role in cultivating a cooperative environment and supporting teacher leadership. Participation in PLCs enhances understanding of curricular changes and leadership competencies, demonstrating the importance of continuous professional development. Furthermore, the review highlights the critical need for self-care and psychological resilience in crisis leadership. Effective school development plans incorporate participatory techniques, involving teachers and staff to address the diverse needs of the school community. Driving digital transformation in schools requires integrating digital technologies into school leadership to improve learning outcomes. Specialized professional development and crucial support networks are vital for school heads to meet their unique challenges.

In conclusion, a comprehensive strategy for building school leadership competencies that integrates strategic policy implementation, professional development, and innovative leadership practices can significantly impact the educational landscape of effective schools. This study underscores the necessity for legislative measures and dedicated support to enable school heads to navigate their multifaceted roles effectively, ultimately contributing to the advancement of educational quality and success.

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