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DECISION MAKING AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Noor Ashikin Mat Shoib^{1*}, Roslee Talip², Nursuhaidah Sukor³

¹ Faculty of Education and Sport Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah Malaysia
Email: NOOR_ASHIKIN_DP23@iluv.ums.edu.my

² Faculty of Education and Sport Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah Malaysia
Email: Roslee_73@ums.edu.my

³ Faculty of Education and Sport Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah Malaysia
Email: nursuhaidahsukor@ums.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) examines contemporary research on decision-making and educational leadership, focusing on studies from 2022 to 2024. The study addresses the increasing complexity of educational leadership by investigating key themes that impact leadership effectiveness in dynamic environments. A comprehensive search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC databases, yielding a final dataset of 32 primary studies analyzed under the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The findings are organized into three major themes: (1) Leadership Skills and Professional Development, highlighting the competencies and training needed for effective decision-making; (2) Crisis Leadership and Adaptation, emphasizing the adaptability, communication skills, and resilience required to lead during challenging times; and (3) Inclusive and Data-Driven Decision-Making, which highlights the role of technology and collaborative approaches in fostering inclusivity and optimizing resource use. Quantitative analysis indicates that approximately 55% of the studies reported a significant link between data-driven decision-making and improved institutional outcomes, while 48% emphasized emotional intelligence as essential for managing crises. The review concludes that a multifaceted approach integrating professional skills, crisis adaptability, and inclusive, data-informed strategies is crucial for effective educational leadership. These insights provide valuable implications for policymakers and practitioners aiming to enhance leadership frameworks, suggesting that modern educational leaders must balance analytical and emotional competencies to meet diverse institutional demands effectively.

Keywords:

Educational Leadership, Decision-Making, Crisis Leadership, Data-Driven Decision-Making, Professional Development.

Introduction

Decision-making is a crucial element of educational leadership, significantly affecting the efficiency and effectiveness of educational institutions. Notably, educational leaders are responsible for making various daily decisions, encompassing administrative and pedagogical aspects, which profoundly influence the learning environment and student outcomes (Fossland & Sandvoll, 2023). The decision-making process in educational leadership consists of identifying challenges, assessing alternatives, and implementing solutions that align with the institution's goals and values (Amalia et al., 2020; Muchtarom, 2023). In particular, successful decision-making involves a combination of technical abilities, ethical factors, and emotional intelligence to manage the intricacies of educational environments (Robbins & Trabichet, 2009; Wang, 2020).

In recent times, the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in educational leadership has become a groundbreaking resource for improving decision-making processes. As such, AI technologies can analyze large volumes of data rapidly and offer immediate insights, assisting leaders in making choices based on data and evidence (Wang, 2021). Nonetheless, dependence on AI brings up worries regarding the possible clash between decisions influenced by data and those grounded in moral values (Weber et al., 2023). Thus, it is essential for leaders in education to harmonize AI's analytical strengths with human discernment to guarantee that choices are ethically appropriate and consistent with the institution's values (Geel et al., 2018; Wang, 2021).

Making ethical decisions is essential to educational leadership, as leaders frequently encounter situations that necessitate weighing conflicting interests and values (Lim et al., 2023). Furthermore, cultivating ethical leadership abilities is crucial for making equitable and just choices that enhance the welfare of all stakeholders (Robbins & Trabichet, 2009). Hence, training programs for educational leaders should highlight the significance of ethical considerations (Shestakova et al., 2022) and offer tactics for addressing conflicts in a way that maintains the integrity of the educational institution (Chitpin & Evers, 2014; Robbins & Trabichet, 2009).

Emotions significantly influence how educational leaders make decisions (Bartholomeyczik et al., 2022). These emotions can affect leaders' judgments and actions, sometimes in a positive way by promoting empathy and understanding and at other times in a negative way by obscuring rational thinking (Wang, 2020). Therefore, grasping the connection between emotions and thinking is essential for enhancing decision-making in educational leadership (Namaziandost et al., 2023). Moreover, leaders need to possess the ability to handle their own emotions and those of others to foster a nurturing and productive learning atmosphere (Fernandes, 2021; Wang, 2020). Accordingly, by combining emotional intelligence with data-informed and ethical decision-making strategies, educational leaders can manage the

complexities of their responsibilities more efficiently and promote positive educational results (Wister et al., 2018)

Literature Review

The literature on educational leadership and decision-making reveals significant trends, strengths, and weaknesses in addressing the evolving complexities within school systems. Domínguez and Casanova (Domínguez & Casanova, 2024) emphasized that adultism in educational settings often impedes authentic student participation, particularly among Latinx youth confronting racial injustices in schools. Similarly, Domínguez and Bertrand (Domínguez & Bertrand, 2023) illustrated how performative allyship by educational leaders limits genuine involvement from youth, suggesting a broader issue where leadership practices, though well-intended, may lack substantial support for minority voices in decision-making processes. This focus on inclusivity is further expanded by Holquist et al. (Holquist et al., 2023), who underscored the need for a robust framework that integrates student voices into leadership. Together, these studies highlighted the necessity for educational leaders to move beyond performative actions and foster a deeper commitment to shared leadership, thus effectively addressing gaps in supporting diverse student voices.

The challenge of managing educational leadership amidst uncertainty is another recurring theme. Yurkofsky and Peurach (Yurkofsky & Peurach, 2023) employed paradox theory to analyze the dual approaches of mitigating and leveraging uncertainty within school systems. This approach reveals inherent contradictions that leaders must navigate to achieve educational excellence while engaging communities equitably. Likewise, MacGregor et al. (MacGregor et al., 2023) reflected on Ontario teachers' experiences with leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the critical need for adaptable strategies to manage unforeseen challenges. Moreover, Banerjee-Batist et al. (Banerjee-Batist et al., 2022) provided a comparative perspective, demonstrating that consultative decision-making was more prevalent in the United States (US) than in India, revealing cultural differences in crisis management. These studies collectively suggested that educational leadership requires frameworks that allow flexibility and community engagement to handle crises effectively, yet this remains an underexplored area in the literature.

In examining the role of technology, Dai et al. (Dai et al., 2024) proposed a framework where AI aids administrative decision-making, allowing educational leaders to focus on vision-setting and conflict management. Similarly, Meng (Meng, 2024) identified opportunities for AI and Big Data in decision-making, though legal and ethical concerns remain a challenge. Uzorka and Kalabuki (Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024) extended this perspective by exploring the transformative potential of technology in Ugandan higher education, highlighting improvements in digital learning environments and data-driven decision-making. These studies suggested a trend toward integrating advanced technology into leadership practices. Nevertheless, they also highlighted gaps regarding the ethical implications and the role of human oversight in decision-making processes facilitated by AI.

The intersection of personal values and leadership styles further influences decision-making in educational settings. Biaddang et al. (Biaddang et al., 2024) employed Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values to reveal that global school leaders prioritize values like self-direction and universalism with less emphasis on achievement. This focus on collective well-being aligns with Nadeem's (Nadeem, 2024) exploration of distributed leadership, emphasizing shared

responsibility and collaborative learning as catalysts for school improvement. Furthermore, Rodriguez and Crawford (Rodriguez & Crawford, 2023) supported this with findings on collective leadership in urban schools, particularly in advocating for undocumented students. The alignment of personal values with leadership styles underscores the importance of inclusive, value-driven leadership. Nonetheless, research on how these values directly impact decision-making outcomes remains limited.

Recent studies on educational leadership's emotional and social aspects point to the critical role of empathy and emotional intelligence in decision-making. Van Dong (Van Dong, 2024) asserted that high school administrators recognize the importance of emotional management skills, suggesting that these skills contribute significantly to effective leadership. Additionally, Scott and Dieker (Scott & Dieker, 2024) discussed the value of emotional understanding for special education leaders, emphasizing the need to bridge the gap between novice and expert knowledge in emotional regulation. Iverson et al. (Iverson et al., 2024) added another dimension by exploring how Black women leaders navigate anti-Blackness in urban schools, shedding light on the emotional and racial challenges embedded within leadership roles. These findings highlighted the need for leadership training beyond technical skills, focusing instead on emotional and social competencies, a gap that current leadership development programs could address more comprehensively.

In conclusion, this review indicates that educational leadership research increasingly addresses inclusivity, adaptability, technological integration, value-driven leadership, and emotional intelligence. However, gaps remain, particularly in understanding how AI ethics, emotional competencies, and personal values shape practical decision-making outcomes. Therefore, future research should develop integrative frameworks that align technology, values, and emotional intelligence within decision-making models, potentially offering more nuanced insights into educational leadership's impact on diverse educational settings.

Research Question

Research Questions (RQs) are fundamental to a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as they provide the essential framework and guidance for the entire review process. They define the boundaries and focus of the review, steering the choices of which studies to include or exclude. This ensures that the review remains pertinent and specific to the chosen topic. Notably, a clearly articulated RQ enables an exhaustive and methodical search of the literature, ensuring all relevant studies related to key aspects of the topic are covered while minimizing bias, resulting in a thorough overview of available evidence. In addition, RQs assist in organizing and categorizing data from the studies included in the review, creating a structure for analyzing findings and synthesizing results to generate meaningful insights. They enhance the review's clarity and precision by avoiding ambiguities and keeping attention fixed on particular issues, which makes the findings more practical and relevant. Moreover, well-crafted RQs enhance transparency and replicability in the review process. This allows other researchers to adopt the same methods to verify results or to build on the review by exploring related areas. In conclusion, RQs ensure that the review supports the broader objectives of the study, whether identifying gaps in the literature, evaluating the effectiveness of certain interventions, or investigating trends within a specific field. Consequently, they are crucial to developing a rigorous, focused, and relevant SLR.

Defining the RQs is a crucial task during the planning stage and a fundamental aspect of any SLR, as it drives the entire review methodology (Kitchenham, 2007). In this study, our objective is to identify and analyze the current state of the art. To formulate our RQs, we applied the PICO framework, a mnemonic device commonly used in qualitative research (Lockwood et al., 2015). PICO stands for Population, Interest, and Context, with each component having a specific meaning:

1. Population (P): This refers to the group or participants of interest in the study. It specifies who the research is focused on, such as a specific demographic, patient group, or community.
2. Interest (I): This represents the main focus or phenomenon of interest in the study. It could be a particular experience, behavior, intervention, or issue that the research aims to explore or understand.
3. Context (Co): This defines the setting, environment, or specific context in which the population and interest are situated. It might refer to geographical location, cultural or social settings, or any other relevant backdrop for the research.

It is worth noting that utilizing the PICO framework aids in organizing RQs clearly and systematically by deconstructing the essential elements of the study into these three parts. This method guarantees that the research remains concentrated and that the questions are clearly articulated, facilitating the search for pertinent literature or the design of a study. This research addressed the following three questions:

1. How do principals and educational administrators develop and apply leadership skills to enhance school effectiveness and meet national education goals in diverse educational settings?
2. In what ways do school leaders adapt their leadership practices to effectively manage educational challenges during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How do educational leaders utilize inclusive strategies and data-driven decision-making to foster equity and student engagement within school environments?

Material and Methods

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method, as outlined by Page et al. (Page et al., 2021), is a widely adopted standard for conducting SLRs, promoting transparency, thoroughness, and consistency throughout the process. Following PRISMA guidelines enables researchers to enhance the precision and rigor of their analyses, as these guidelines provide a clear approach for systematically identifying, screening, and including relevant studies. Additionally, PRISMA highlights the significance of randomized studies for minimizing bias and strengthening the review's evidence base. For this analysis, Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC Database were selected for their extensive coverage and reliability.

PRISMA's framework consists of four essential stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and data extraction. During identification, databases are searched to locate all relevant studies. Screening then applies predefined criteria to filter out irrelevant or low-quality studies. In the eligibility phase, the remaining studies are evaluated to ensure they meet inclusion standards. Finally, data extraction involves gathering and synthesizing information from the selected studies, which is essential for generating meaningful and reliable insights. This structured

approach ensures a rigorous review, leading to trustworthy findings that can inform future research and practical applications.

Identification

This study implemented key steps of the systematic review process to gather a substantial body of relevant literature. The process began with selecting keywords and identifying related terms through dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopedias, and previous studies. All relevant terms were then compiled, and search strings were developed for the WoS, Scopus, and ERIC databases (as detailed in Table 1). Accordingly, this initial phase of the systematic review yielded 604 publications from the three databases pertinent to the study's topic.

Table 1 : The Search String

Scopus	Web of Science (WoS)	ERIC
TITLE-ABS-KEY ("decision making" AND "educational leadership") AND PUBYEAR > 2021 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English"))	"decision making" AND "educational leadership" (Topic) and 2024 or 2023 or 2022 (Publication Years) and Article (Document Types) and English (Languages) and Article (Document Types)	"decision making" AND "educational leadership" pub year min: 2022 Publication type: Journal Article language: English
Date of Access: November 2024		

In conducting an SLR, the identification phase serves as the foundation for gathering a comprehensive body of relevant studies on the research topic. For this study, three major databases—Scopus, WoS, and ERIC—were utilized to capture the breadth of literature on “decision making” and “educational leadership.” These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage and relevance in educational and social sciences. Notably, Scopus, WoS, and ERIC are widely recognized for their thorough indexing and inclusion of high-quality, peer-reviewed sources, providing a robust starting point for the review process.

The search process in each database yielded a significant number of studies, with 188 records identified through Scopus, 164 through WoS, and 252 through ERIC, totaling 604 records. As such, Scopus is particularly valued for its interdisciplinary scope, encompassing a wide array of peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and other research sources. Meanwhile, WoS, known for its strong emphasis on citation data and scholarly impact, contributes influential studies and well-cited research on decision-making and educational leadership. At the same time, ERIC, which produced the highest number of relevant records, focuses specifically on educational research and policy, offering access to empirical studies, policy documents, and instructional materials. This makes it an essential resource for capturing practical and policy-oriented studies within the educational leadership domain.

The combined dataset of 604 records from these databases forms a solid basis for a comprehensive review. This initial identification phase captures diverse perspectives and methodological approaches, ensuring that the literature review includes a wide array of

insights into decision-making processes in educational leadership. Subsequently, these records will undergo further systematic screening and eligibility assessments to ensure relevance and quality, leading to a rich understanding of current trends, research gaps, and future directions in the field. The diversity of sources enhances the study's capacity to generate meaningful, evidence-based conclusions about educational leadership and decision-making practices.

Screening

In refining the initial pool of 604 records identified in the SLR, a series of exclusion criteria were applied to ensure that only the most relevant, high-quality studies were included. The first step involves removing non-English articles and those published before 2022, as well as excluding conference proceedings, book chapters, reviews, and in-press publications. These criteria were established to focus solely on recent, peer-reviewed journal articles that provide empirical evidence or theoretical advancements directly applicable to the study's focus on decision-making and educational leadership. This initial screening phase removed 519 records, significantly narrowing the pool to 85 articles across the three databases.

The remaining records were distributed as follows: 32 from Scopus, 29 from WoS, and 24 from ERIC. This curated selection reflects the rigorous filtering applied, ensuring that only articles of high relevance and quality were retained for the next phases of analysis. In particular, Scopus, with its wide-ranging interdisciplinary content, provided the largest portion of these remaining studies, suggesting its effectiveness in covering recent advancements in educational leadership and decision-making. WoS and ERIC, while yielding fewer records, still contributed valuable studies with a specific emphasis on influential citations and educational research, respectively. The screening process effectively streamlined the dataset, retaining only those studies that align closely with the research objectives and contribute meaningful insights into the current state of educational leadership.

After screening, a duplicate examination was conducted to further refine the selection, removing 19 duplicate articles across the three databases. This final step reduced the dataset to 66 unique articles, ensuring each record offered a distinct contribution without redundancy. This careful process of screening and deduplication has produced a robust, well-curated body of literature ready for detailed analysis and synthesis. This final selection of articles is expected to provide a solid foundation for examining trends, identifying research gaps, and drawing evidence-based conclusions on the interplay between decision-making and educational leadership, ultimately enhancing the study's relevance and rigor.

Table 2: The Selection Criterion Is Searching

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2022 – 2024	< 2022
Literature type	Journal (Article)	Conference, Book, Review

Eligibility

In the third step, known as the eligibility phase, 66 articles were prepared for review. During this stage, all articles' titles and key content were carefully examined to ensure they met the inclusion criteria and aligned with the current research objectives. Consequently, 34 articles were excluded as they did not qualify due to the out-of-field, title not significant, abstract not

related to the study's objective, and no full-text access founded on empirical evidence. As a result, a total of 32 articles remain for the upcoming review.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

An integrative analysis approach was employed in this study as a key assessment strategy to examine and synthesize diverse research designs (primarily quantitative methods). The primary objective was to identify pertinent themes and subthemes. The theme development process began with data collection. Figure 2 illustrates how the authors carefully analyzed a set of 32 publications for statements or content related to the core topics of the study. Following this, the authors evaluated significant current studies on decision-making and educational leadership, examining methodologies and research findings across studies. Collaboration among the authors facilitated the development of themes grounded in the study's evidence. Throughout the data analysis, a log was maintained to document all observations, reflections, challenges, and ideas pertinent to interpreting the data. Finally, the authors compared findings to ensure consistency in the theme development process. Any conceptual disagreements were discussed among the authors to reach a consensus.

Table 3: Number and Details of Primary Studies Database

No	Authors	Title	Year	Journal	Scopus	Web of Science	ERIC
P1	Al Ajmi H.R. (Ajmi, 2024)	Principals' leadership skills to meet the national strategy for education in basic schools	2024	Journal Of Education And E-Learning Research	/		
P2	Alaric Awingura Alagbela (Alagbela, 2024)	College Authorities' Leadership Styles and Practices on School Effectiveness of Ghana's Colleges of Education	2024	Journal Of Educational Leadership And Policy Studies			/
P3	Albalawi, NKS (Albalawi, 2023)	The influence of educational administration on reflective teaching and educational leadership qualities at Tabuk University	2023	Journal Of Namibian Studies History Politic Culture		/	
P4	Bainbridge A.; Reid H.; Del Negro G. (Bainbridge et al., 2022)	Towards a Virtuosity of School Leadership: clinical support and supervision as professional learning	2022	Professional Development In Education	/		
P5	Ballangrud, BOB; Aas, M	Ethical thinking and decision-making in the leadership of	2022	Educational Research		/	

	(Ballangrud & Aas, 2022)	professional learning communities					
P6	Banerjee-Batist R.; Gajjar K.; Saxena P.; Smetana J.B.; Muduli A. (Banerjee-Batist et al., 2022)	Leadership response to COVID-19: a comparative analysis of the education sector in USA and India	2022	Human Resource Development International	/	/	
P7	Baptiste J.; Choudhury L.; Giubertoni E.; Sum N. (Baptiste et al., 2024)	A balancing act: successfully managing senior leadership roles and motherhood	2024	School Leadership And Management	/	/	
P8	Bertrand, M; Deolindo, TF; Garcia, LW; Domínguez, AD (Bertrand et al., 2024)	Youth Leadership and Intersectionality: Which Youth Have a Say in School Decision-Making?	2024	Physical Culture And Sport Studies And Research		/	
P9	Charles L. Lowery (Lowery et al., 2024)	When Complexity and Uncertainty Became Life: Delaware School Principals Roles and Leadership Practices during COVID-19 Crisis - A Mixed Method Case Study	2024	International Journal Of Educational Leadership Preparation			/
P10	Dai R.; Thomas M.K.E.; Rawolle S. (Dai et al., 2024)	The roles of AI and educational leaders in AI-assisted administrative decision-making: a proposed framework for symbiotic collaboration	2024	Australian Educational Researcher	/	/	
P11	Domínguez A.D.;	Where are the Coconspirators?:	2023	Urban Review	/		

	Bertrand M. (Domínguez & Bertrand, 2023)	Examining Performative Youth Allyship and Opposition by Educational Leaders in K-12 Schools					
P12	Federico Tejeiro (Tejeiro, 2024)	Distributed Leadership and Inclusive Schools	2024	International Journal Of Educational Leadership And Management			/

P13	Freelon, R (Freelon, 2022)	Transformational Resistance and Parent Leadership: Black Parents in a School District Decision-Making Process	2022	Urban Education		/	
P14	Ghazali-Mohammed Z.; Abaci S.; Robertson J. (Ghazali-Mohammed et al., 2024)	'It was building a plane as we were flying it!' Adapting teaching through a crisis: lessons from educational leadership staff in Higher Education	2024	Higher Education Research And Development	/	/	
P15	Grant C.; Kajee F.A. (Grant & Kajee, 2023)	Expansive learning in the leadership development of school learners: a Southern African case study	2023	International Journal Of Leadership In Education	/		
P16	Jeana M. Partin (Partin, n.d.)	A Systematic Review of Mindfulness in School Principals	2022	Education Leadership Review			/
P17	Jin M.; Yao L. (Jin & Yao, 2022)	Influence Mechanism of Educational Leadership on Environmental Accounting Based on Big Data Algorithm	2022	Journal Of Environmental And Public Health	/	/	
P18	Deniz Örüçü, H.	Navigating the COVID-19 Turbulence	2022	Research In Educational			/

	Elif Kutlugün (Örücü & Kutlugün, n.d.)	in Higher Education: Evidence from Turkish Faculty Members		Administration & Leadership			
P19	Maria B. Scuichetti (Wolf & Scuichetti, 2024)	Integrating Trauma-Informedness within a Multi-Tiered System of Support: The Critical Role of Administrators	2024	Journal Of Educational Leadership And Policy Studies			/
P20	Miller D.; Tilak S.; Evans M.; Glassman M. (Miller et al., 2023)	Using social media to create real time online networks of school leaders	2023	Journal Of Educational Administration	/	/	
P21	Rodriguez S.; Crawford E.R. (Rodriguez & Crawford, 2023)	School-Based Personnel Advocacy for Undocumented Students Through Collective Leadership in Urban Schools: A Comparative Case Study	2023	Journal Of Research On Leadership Education	/	/	
P22	Rodriguez, Sonia (Rodriguez, n.d.)	The Latina Superintendent's Ethical Problem Solving for Equity and Justice	2022	Educational Leadership And Administration : Teaching And Program Development			/
P23	Sari, Tamer (Ordu & Sari, n.d.)	The Role of Innovative Work Behaviour in the Relationship between Organizational Support and Organizational Happiness	2022	Research In Educational Administration & Leadership			/
P24	Schussler, Deborah (Woo et al., n.d.)	Teacher Leadership -- Collective Actions, Decision-Making and Well-Being	2022	International Journal Of Teacher Leadership			/
P25	Scott L.M.; Dieker L.A. (Scott	Understanding Emotions: A Practical Guide for Special	2024	Journal Of Special Education Leadership	/		

	& Dieker, 2024)	Education Leadership Preparation					
P26	Sellami, AL; Sawalhi, R; Romanowski, MH; Amatullah, T (Sellami et al., 2022)	Definitions of educational leadership - Arab educators' perspectives	2022	International Journal Of Qualitative Studies In Education		/	
P27	Smith, Juliana (Smith & Cornelissen, n.d.)	Leadership Approaches of Principals Heading National Strategy Learner Attainment Schools in South Africa	2022	International Journal Of Educational Leadership And Management		/	

P28	Snyder, Richard (Snyder & Townsley, n.d.)	What Are We Talking About? Data Use among Education Leaders of Change	2022	International Journal Of Educational Leadership Preparation		/	
P29	Sun, JP; Xia, JG; Hua, C; Man, KW; Johnson, BL Jr (Sun et al., 2024)	Assessing the Psychometric Qualities of the Data-Informed School Leadership Survey	2024	Education Administration Quarterly		/	
P30	Uzorka A.; Kalabuki K. (Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024)	The transformative impact of technological advancements in educational leadership on student experiences and outcomes	2024	Education And Information Technologies	/	/	
P31	Van Dong T. (Van Dong, 2024)	Emotional Management Skills and Training among High School Administrators	2024	International Journal Of Educational Organization And Leadership	/		
P32	Wermke W.; Jarl M.; Prøitz T.S.;	Comparing principal autonomy in time and space: modelling school leaders'	2022	Journal Of Curriculum Studies	/	/	

	Nordholm D. (Wermke et al., 2022)	decision making and control					
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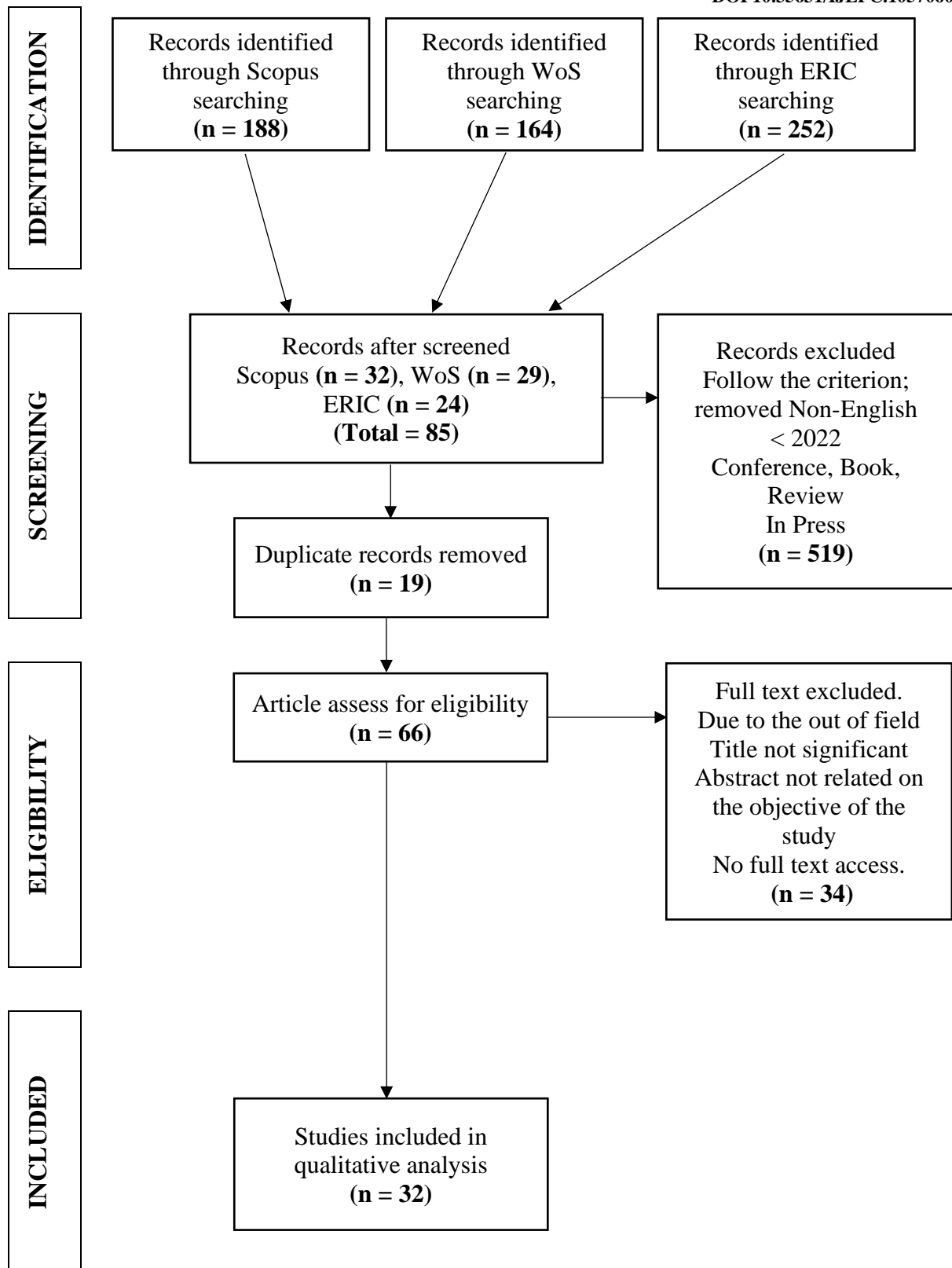


Figure 1: Flow Diagram of the Proposed Search Study

Quality of Appraisal

According to the guidelines proposed by Kitchenham and Charters (Kitchenham & Charter, 2007), once we have selected the primary study, we have to assess the quality of the research they present and quantitatively compare them. Primary studies refer to the original research articles, papers, or documents directly included in the systematic review after the initial selection process. These studies are considered the primary sources of evidence that are analyzed, assessed for quality, and compared quantitatively or qualitatively to answer the RQs defined for the review. In this study, we apply Quality Assessment (QA) from Anas Abouzahra et al. (Abouzahra et al., 2020), comprising six QAs for our SLR. The scoring procedure for evaluating each criterion involves three possible ratings: "Yes" (Y) with a score of 1 if the criterion is fully met, "Partly" (P) with a score of 0.5 if the criterion is somewhat met but contains some gaps or shortcomings, and "No" (N) with a score of 0 if the criterion is not met at all.

- QA1. Is the purpose of the study clearly stated?
- QA2. Is the interest and the usefulness of the work clearly presented?
- QA3. Is the study methodology clearly established?
- QA4. Are the concepts of the approach clearly defined?
- QA5. Is the work compared and measured with other similar work?
- QA6. Are the limitations of the work clearly mentioned?

The table outlines a QA process used to evaluate a study based on specific criteria. Three experts assess the study using the criteria listed, and each criterion is scored as "Yes" (Y), "Partly" (P), or "No" (N). Here is a detailed explanation:

- I. Is the purpose of the study clearly stated?
This criterion checks whether the study's objectives are clearly defined and articulated. A clear purpose helps set the direction and scope of the research.
- II. Is the interest and usefulness of the work clearly presented?
This criterion evaluates whether the study's significance and potential contributions are well-explained. It measures the relevance and impact of the research.
- III. Is the study methodology clearly established?
This assesses whether the research methodology is well-defined and appropriate for achieving the study's objectives. Clarity in methodology is crucial for the study's validity and reproducibility.
- IV. Are the concepts of the approach clearly defined?
This criterion examines whether the theoretical framework and key concepts are clearly articulated. Clear definitions are essential for understanding the study's approach.
- V. Is the work compared and measured with other similar work?
This evaluates whether the study has been benchmarked against existing research. Comparing with other studies helps position the work within the broader academic context and highlights its contributions.
- VI. Are the limitations of the work clearly mentioned?

Each expert independently assesses the study according to these criteria, and the scores are then totaled across all experts to determine the overall mark. For a study to be accepted for the following process, the total mark, derived from summing the scores from all the experts, must exceed 3.0. This threshold ensures that only studies meeting a certain quality standard proceed further.

Result and Finding

Background of the selected study: based on QA, Table 4 summarizes the result of assessment performance for selected primary studies.

Table 4 : Quality Assessment Table For Selected Paper

No	QA1	QA2	QA3	QA4	QA5	QA6	Total Mark	Percentage(%)
P1	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.30%
P2	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.30%
P3	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.30%
P4	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P5	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P6	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	100%
P7	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P8	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.30%
P9	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P10	1	1	1	1	1	0.5	5.5	91.70%
P11	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.30%
P12	1	1	1	1	1	0.5	5.5	91.70%
P13	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P14	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P15	1	1	0.5	1	1	0.5	5	83.30%
P16	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P17	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	100%
P18	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P19	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	100%
P20	1	1	1	1	1	0.5	5.5	91.70%
P21	1	1	1	1	1	0.5	5.5	91.70%
P22	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P23	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	100%
P24	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P25	1	1	0.5	1	0.5	1	5	83.30%
P26	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.30%
P27	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P28	1	1	1	1	1	0.5	5.5	91.70%
P29	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	100%
P30	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%
P31	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.30%
P32	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	5.5	91.70%

Summary:

- **Highest Score:** The paper by (Banerjee-Batist et al., 2022; Jin & Yao, 2022; Ordu & Sari, n.d.; Sun et al., 2024; Wolf & Scuichetti, 2024) achieved the highest score of 100% due to clear articulation of purpose, usefulness, methodology, defined concepts, comparison with other work, and mention of limitations.

- **Lowest Score:** The paper by (Ajmi, 2024; Alagbela, 2024; Albalawi, 2023; Bertrand et al., 2024; Domínguez & Bertrand, 2023; Grant & Kajee, 2023; Scott & Dieker, 2024; Sellami et al., 2022; Van Dong, 2024) scored the lowest (83.30%), as it partly met the criteria for the concepts of approach and comparison with other work, and did not mention the limitations.

The produced themes were eventually tweaked to ensure consistency. The analysis selection was carried out by experts in decision making and educational leadership to determine the validity of the problems. The expert review phase ensures each subtheme's clarity, importance, and suitability by establishing the domain validity. The authors also compared the findings to resolve discrepancies in the theme-creation process. Note that if any inconsistencies in the themes arose, the authors addressed them with one another. The review phase helped ensure each sub-theme's clarity, importance, and adequacy by establishing domain validity. Adjustments based on feedback and expert comments have been made at the author's discretion.

Theme 1 : Leadership Skills and Professional Development

This theme focuses on leadership competencies, skill development, professional support, and balancing personal and professional roles within educational leadership. Note that the articles address the personal growth and ethical considerations of leaders in educational settings. The analysis of recent research abstracts on leadership skills and professional development in educational settings highlights several emerging themes. Al Ajmi (Ajmi, 2024) investigated leadership skills required by principals in elementary schools to achieve national educational objectives, with a focus on crisis management and visionary leadership, suggesting these traits are crucial for addressing strategic needs. Similarly, Alagbela (Alagbela, 2024) explored the impact of leadership styles in Ghana's Colleges of Education, noting that a participatory and human-centered approach enhances governance and management. Moreover, Albalawi (Albalawi, 2023) asserted this discussion by emphasizing the importance of critical and reflective thinking in educational administration, which fosters improved decision-making and communication skills necessary for effective leadership.

Further insights into leadership support mechanisms are presented by Bainbridge, Reid, and Del Negro (Bainbridge et al., 2022), who proposed a clinical support model that enhances school leaders' well-being and decision-making abilities, particularly in challenging environments. Furthermore, Ballangrud and Aas (Ballangrud & Aas, 2022) extended this perspective by focusing on ethical leadership within professional learning communities, stressing the need for inclusive and democratic leadership practices to address ethical dilemmas. Baptiste, Choudhury, Giubertoni, and Sum (Baptiste et al., 2024) investigated the challenges faced by women in balancing leadership roles with personal responsibilities. This advocates for policies that support equitable decision-making and flexible working arrangements, which can alleviate the dual demands of leadership and caregiving.

Finally, recent studies underscore the role of emotional intelligence and mindfulness in educational leadership. Partin (Partin, n.d.) highlighted mindfulness as a critical component of effective leadership, enhancing principals' decision-making, well-being, and organizational impact. Meanwhile, Scott and Dieker (Scott & Dieker, 2024) emphasized the significance of emotional intelligence for leaders in special education, linking emotional regulation to resilience and decision-making. At the same time, Van Dong (Van Dong, 2024) supported this

viewpoint, demonstrating that high school administrators with developed emotional management skills report improved leadership effectiveness and school climate. These findings collectively underscore the significance of emotional intelligence and resilience as essential components of contemporary educational leadership.

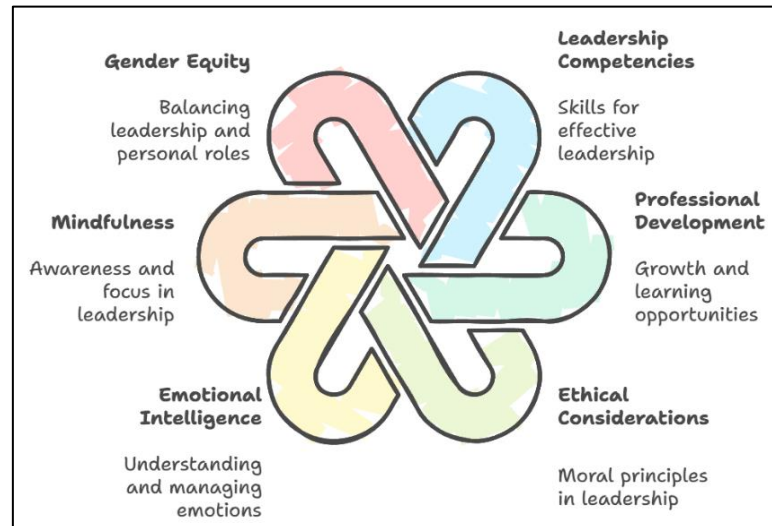


Figure 2: Leadership Skills and Professional Development

Theme 2 : Crisis Leadership and Adaptation

Studies on this theme explore leadership practices and responses to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and emphasize trauma-informed approaches, resilience, and adaptability in crisis conditions. The analysis of recent research on crisis leadership and adaptation within educational settings reveals key insights into how leaders navigated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Banerjee-Batist et al. (Banerjee-Batist et al., 2022) explored how educational leaders in the US and India adapted to the crisis, highlighting differences in decision-making approaches. Leaders in the US demonstrated a consultative and group-based approach, while their Indian counterparts favored a more directive style. This study also underscored the creative measures leaders employed to bridge the digital divide and allocate resources, demonstrating the vital role of cultural context in shaping crisis response strategies. Furthermore, Lowery (Lowery et al., 2024) complemented this analysis by examining Delaware school principals' adaptive strategies, revealing that leaders had to respond dynamically to shifting educational demands, balancing immediate needs with long-term adjustments to support students and school communities.

Further contributions to the theme of crisis leadership include Ghazali-Mohammed et al. (Ghazali-Mohammed et al., 2024) and Kutlugün (Örücü & Kutlugün, n.d.), who examined higher education responses to the pandemic. Similarly, Ghazali-Mohammed et al. observed that United Kingdom (UK) universities faced significant disruption, with leaders needing to shift from traditional in-person delivery to hybrid and online teaching modes. This requires quick decision-making and adaptability to support faculty in a rapidly changing environment. Moreover, Kutlugün's study in Turkey, drawing on the Turbulence Theory, identified a complex interplay of trust, experience, and surveillance in decision-making processes, where rapid yet sometimes ineffective choices by higher education leaders led to varying levels of

trust among staff. These studies collectively emphasize the importance of flexibility, trust-building, and robust communication in crisis leadership to manage organizational resilience.

Lastly, Scuichetti (Wolf & Scuichetti, 2024) introduced a trauma-informed approach to educational leadership, especially within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Scuichetti's research stressed the necessity for administrators to understand and implement trauma-informed practices to address the multifaceted needs of students during crises. The integration of trauma-sensitive decision-making into educational leadership adds a layer of emotional responsiveness that is crucial for addressing students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional challenges, particularly in crises. Together, these studies illustrate the multifaceted demands of crisis leadership, from addressing cultural influences on decision-making to fostering a supportive, trauma-informed environment for students.

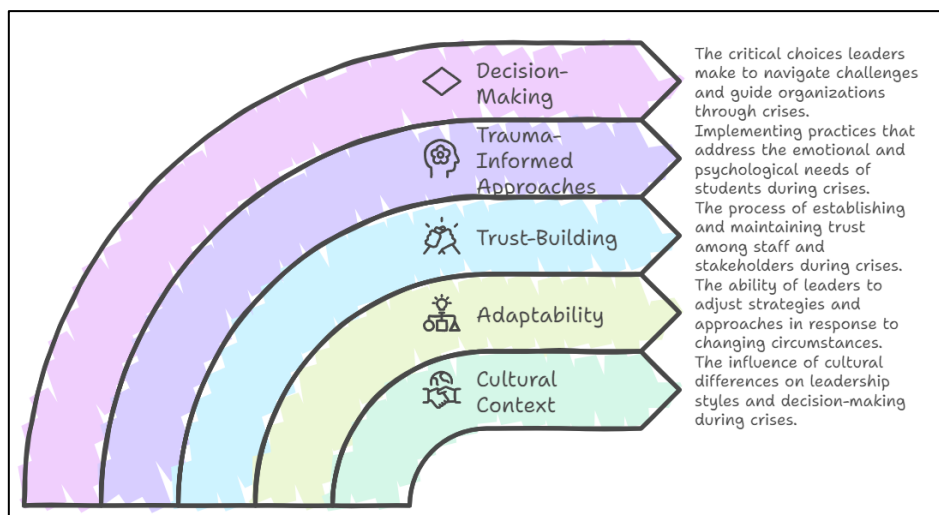


Figure 3: Crisis Leadership and Adaptation

Theme 3 : Inclusive and Data-Driven Decision-Making

This theme includes articles on inclusive practices in leadership, the importance of data for informed decision-making, and the use of technology in educational leadership. Articles focus on representing diverse voices, leveraging social media for leadership networking, and using AI and big data to enhance decision-making processes. Particularly, the theme of inclusive and data-driven decision-making within educational leadership highlights the growing emphasis on utilizing data, fostering inclusivity, and incorporating collaborative approaches to enhance educational environments. Dai, Thomas, and Rawolle (Dai et al., 2024) presented a framework that integrates AI with human decision-making in educational administration, emphasizing the need for a balanced collaboration between technology and educational leaders. This approach allows AI to handle data analysis while human leaders focus on establishing vision and managing conflicts. Similarly, Jin and Yao (Jin & Yao, 2022) explored the potential of big data algorithms in enhancing educational leadership using advanced data analytics to improve students' decision-making processes and leadership development. Snyder (Snyder & Townsley, n.d.) further supported this trend by discussing the data-driven decision-making model, which provides educational leaders with a structured approach to maximize resource efficiency and effectiveness in decision-making within educational institutions.

The theme of inclusive leadership is strongly advocated by Tejeiro (Tejeiro, 2024), who examined distributed leadership and its impact on inclusive school environments. Through cooperative teamwork and shared decision-making, this leadership style promotes student and family participation, contributing to a more inclusive educational atmosphere. This idea aligns with Domínguez and Bertrand's (Domínguez & Bertrand, 2023) findings, which revealed that educational leaders sometimes engage in performative allyship toward youth-led initiatives, often hindering genuine youth participation. By contrast, true coconspirators among adult leaders amplify youth voices and foster inclusive decision-making. Meanwhile, Freelon (Freelon, 2022) highlighted the role of parent leaders, particularly Black parents, in advocating for their communities within school decision-making processes, demonstrating that inclusive leadership enables marginalized voices to influence educational reform meaningfully.

Lastly, the role of digital and social platforms in facilitating real-time, collaborative decision-making among school leaders is underscored in Miller et al.'s (Miller et al., 2023) study. It illustrated how online networks, such as those on Reddit, help school leaders overcome isolation in decision-making by providing peer support. Similarly, Uzorka and Kalabuki (Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024) demonstrated that technological advancements, particularly in Ugandan higher education, create opportunities for a dynamic, data-driven learning environment that supports inclusive and adaptive leadership. These studies collectively emphasized the transformative impact of technology on inclusive educational leadership, advocating for professional development that equips leaders with the digital literacy necessary for effective, data-informed decision-making.

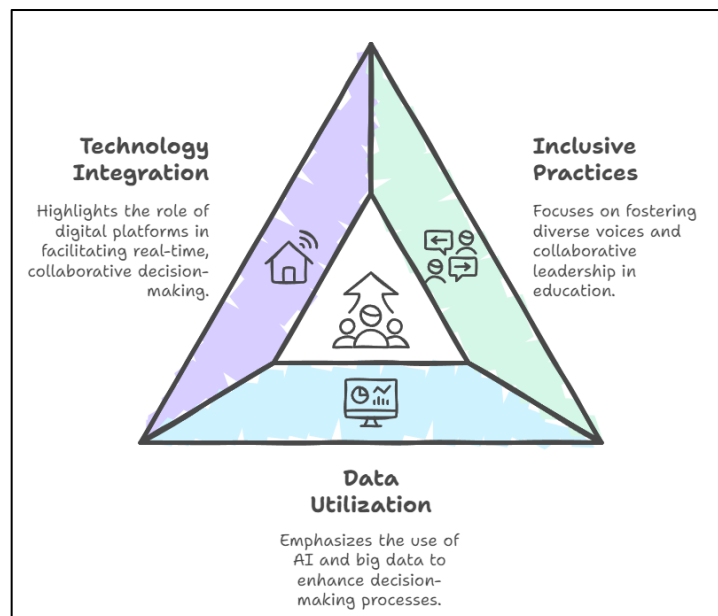


Figure 4: Inclusive and Data-Driven Decision-Making

Discussion and Conclusion

Recent studies on leadership skills and professional development within educational contexts highlight key themes that define effective leadership. Principals and educational leaders are increasingly expected to possess strong crisis management, visionary leadership, and reflective thinking skills. Notably, these attributes not only help them

address immediate strategic challenges but also enable them to guide their institutions toward achieving national educational objectives. Furthermore, a participatory and human-centered leadership approach has been proven to foster better governance, enhance communication, and improve decision-making, which is essential for addressing routine and complex issues in educational administration. In addition, support mechanisms for educational leaders play a critical role in maintaining their well-being and enhancing their decision-making capabilities, especially in high-pressure environments. Moreover, clinical support models, focusing on collaborative and reflective professional learning, help leaders manage the psychological demands of their roles. As such, embedded within professional learning communities, ethical leadership encourages inclusive and democratic practices that allow leaders to navigate ethical dilemmas effectively. Additionally, policies promoting equitable decision-making and flexible working arrangements are essential in supporting leaders, particularly women, who balance professional responsibilities with personal caregiving roles. Emotional intelligence and mindfulness are increasingly recognized as crucial components of successful educational leadership. These traits contribute to resilience, enhance leaders' well-being, and positively impact organizational climate. Thus, leaders with strong emotional regulation and mindfulness practices are better equipped to manage stress, make sound decisions, and foster a positive school environment. Emotional intelligence, particularly in special education leadership, is linked to improved adaptability and a supportive school culture.

Recent research on crisis leadership and adaptation in education has uncovered critical insights into how leaders managed the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Across various educational contexts, leaders demonstrated adaptability and strategic decision-making tailored to their cultural settings. In the US, educational leaders tended to employ a consultative and group-based approach, fostering collaboration and resource-sharing to bridge digital divides and support their communities. In contrast, leaders in India often adopted a more directive style, underscoring the influence of cultural factors on crisis response strategies. These adaptive responses highlight the significance of flexibility and cultural awareness in effective crisis management. Notably, higher education institutions faced particularly complex challenges during the pandemic, with leaders needing to pivot quickly from traditional teaching models to hybrid and online modalities. In the UK, university leaders made swift decisions to support faculty and students amid disrupted learning environments. Similarly, higher education leaders navigated a turbulent period in Turkey that tested institutional trust, experience, and control. Consequently, rapid decision-making processes sometimes led to trust issues among staff, emphasizing the need for open communication and trust-building. These studies highlight that effective crisis leadership in higher education requires flexibility, transparent communication, and a careful balance between immediate actions and long-term strategies to support resilience. Thus, adding a further dimension to crisis leadership, trauma-informed approaches have become increasingly important, particularly within MTSS in schools. Leaders implementing trauma-sensitive practices demonstrate an understanding of the emotional and psychological impacts of crises on students. Therefore, integrating trauma-informed decision-making within educational leadership helps address the varied academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of students, supporting them more holistically in challenging times.

The focus on inclusive and data-driven decision-making in educational leadership reflects an increasing reliance on technology and collaborative practices to enhance school environments. Recent frameworks advocate for the integration of AI in administrative roles, where AI manages data analysis while educational leaders concentrate on vision-setting and conflict resolution. The application of big data algorithms further strengthens this approach, providing insights that refine leadership development and optimize decision-making processes. This structured, data-driven model enables leaders to allocate resources efficiently, underscoring the value of data in educational settings. Notably, inclusivity is a central theme in distributed leadership models, emphasizing collaborative decision-making and broadened participation for students and families. Furthermore, distributed leadership fosters an inclusive school culture by encouraging input from diverse stakeholders and enhancing community engagement in educational matters. Research on youth and parental involvement highlights the significance of authentic support from educational leaders. True allies, or coconspirators, amplify the voices of marginalized groups, such as Black parents and youth leaders, ensuring that their perspectives influence school policies and reforms. This authentic inclusion contrasts with performative allyship, which can undermine genuine engagement and the pursuit of equitable educational practices. Moreover, adopting digital and social platforms has further revolutionized collaborative decision-making in education, offering school leaders real-time access to peer support and advice. Digital networks mitigate isolation by connecting leaders with colleagues who provide timely feedback on complex issues. Additionally, advancements in technology enable data-driven and adaptable leadership approaches, particularly in higher education environments. The transformative potential of technology is evident in improving decision-making and creating inclusive, responsive learning spaces. Therefore, professional development in digital literacy becomes essential to equip educational leaders with the skills necessary for effective, inclusive, and data-informed decision-making in an evolving educational landscape.

Nevertheless, these findings underscore the importance of equipping educational leaders with emotional resilience, adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and robust communication skills to navigate the complex demands of crisis leadership. Leveraging inclusive, data-driven decision-making through digital tools like AI and online networks enhances governance by integrating diverse voices, optimizing resources, and fostering a collaborative, adaptive educational environment.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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