Evaluation of educational leadership theories in schools: a systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

Due to the widespread belief that the quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes, educational leadership became very interesting topic in this century. Therefore, this paper aimed to review the most relevant and useful leadership theories for understanding how educational leadership works in schools. In doing so, this paper employed a scoping review methodology, the study synthesizes literature published between 2014 and 2025. The selection process followed four stages outlined in the PRISMA flow diagram: identification, eligibility, screening, and inclusion, in which 79 records were identified through a comprehensive search across various databases, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ERIC, ScienceDirect, and Scopus. The paper found that the major theories of leadership include great man theory, traits, behavioral, situational, contingency, path-goal, participative, transformational, transactional, and servant leadership theory. The paper recommended the necessity of raising awareness of educational administers', school principals', and teachers about the importance of practicing educational leadership through workshops and training courses. The present review suggests several future directions, including the need to incorporate latest AI technologies in applications of leadership theories in education context.

▓ INTRODUCTION

There is great interest in educational leadership in the early part of the 21st century. This is because of the widespread belief that the quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes (Bush, 2007). Educational leadership is a long-term campaign it grows out of knowledge, of experience and requires patience and much time, and its leadership can be enjoyed only in the long run (Sefi, 2012). Yukl (2002) highlights the vague and subjective nature of educational leadership and he finally identifies it with influence, value and vision. Carmi (2004) avers that educational leadership in general and the teacher as an educational leader in particular, should develop learning materials, curricula, programs for change and effectiveness in class activities. Ben (2003) claims that the objectives underlying educational leadership are raising the ability of those led to solve problems inspired by the

leader, as well as building and encouraging those led to realize their potential, rise above mediocrity and move to high levels of performance and educational commitment. Bush (2007) stated that there is also increasing recognition that schools require effective leaders and managers if they are to provide the best possible education f or their learners. Schools need trained and committed teachers but they, in turn, need the leadership of highly effective principals and support from other senior and middle managers.

Evolution of leadership theories is a comprehensive study of leadership trends over the years, and in various contexts and theoretical foundations (Maslanka, 2004). Most leadership studies are conducted in business organizations (Avolio et al., 1999), a few examine leadership in educational settings (Koh et al., 1995). Amanchukwu et al. (2015) examine recent theoretical developments in the study of educational leadership in school management. They conclude that success is certain if the application of

the leadership styles, principles and methods is properly and fully applied in school management. Perera, et al. (2021) conclude that understanding the most suitable leadership style or the combination of leadership styles is crucial in achieving common goal attainment which is ultimately result in school overall success. According to Bwalya (2023) by understanding the diverse range of leadership theories, individuals can develop their leadership capabilities and organizations can adopt effective leadership practices to drive success and create positive work environments. Despite the proliferation of leadership theories, there remains a notable gap in comprehensive reviews that connect progressive leadership theories with fostering innovation and entrepreneurship in education (Hojeij, 2024). Sirisookslip et al. (2015) revealed currently, most of the school administrators are facing problems of applying suitable leadership theory in their administration. Therefore, applying suitable leadership may assist administrators to solve the confusion due to the overlapping of work occurred in work practice, administration, and ordering or commanding among the top level of management team work unit. Hence, addressing these gaps is essential for developing effective leadership theories to enhance the educational landscape.

Therefore, this scoping literature review aims to synthesize the literature on the educational leadership and leadership theories in the school context. By mapping the current state of research, this review will identify key themes, gaps, and future research directions to enhance our understanding of how educational leadership theories can be effectively implemented and leveraged within schools. Hence, this paper aims to review the most relevant and useful leadership theories for understanding how educational leadership works in schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a scoping review methodology to synthesize the literature on the educational leadership theories. A Scoping reviews, a type of knowledge synthesis, follow a systematic approach to map evidence on a topic and identify main concepts, theories, sources, and knowledge gaps (Tricco et al., 2018). The study explored the significance of the existing published articles that could be used as meta-synthesis data. This study examines articles on the trend of educational leadership theories. The search strategy involves a comprehensive and systematic search of the following electronic databases: Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ERIC, ScienceDirect, and Scopus. The search terms included only combinations of keywords such as educational leadership, educational leadership in schools, leadership theories, and leadership styles. The search will be limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2014 and 2025, as this timeframe reflects the recent growing interest and research on educational leadership. The study selection process will follow the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018). The research aims are addressed only by papers that meet the predefined criteria. The following criteria are used in this selection process. First, the open-access publication system can be found in international journals. Second, the articles, mainly those published within the timeframe, have focused on identifying and describing the key themes and patterns in the literature related to the theories and styles of educational leadership in schools. The relevant bibliographic details, study characteristics, educational leadership context, theories and styles of educational leadership, and key findings are included in the studies:
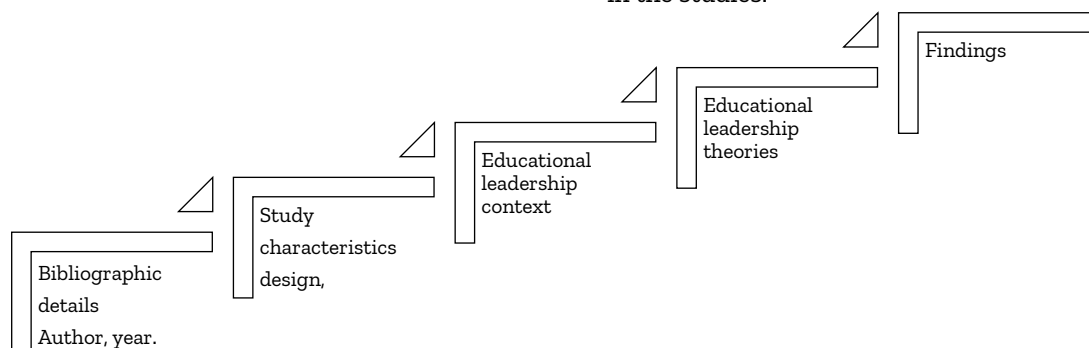

Figure 1. Relevant aspects of the scoping review

The thematic analysis employed the significant concepts extracted from the data into a comprehensive list of themes. The findings were reported following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018).

■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are analyzed to align with the research objectives. The data gathered underwent initial screening via Publish software. The research paper selection process followed four stages outlined in the PRISMA flow diagram: identification, eligibility, screening, and inclusion.
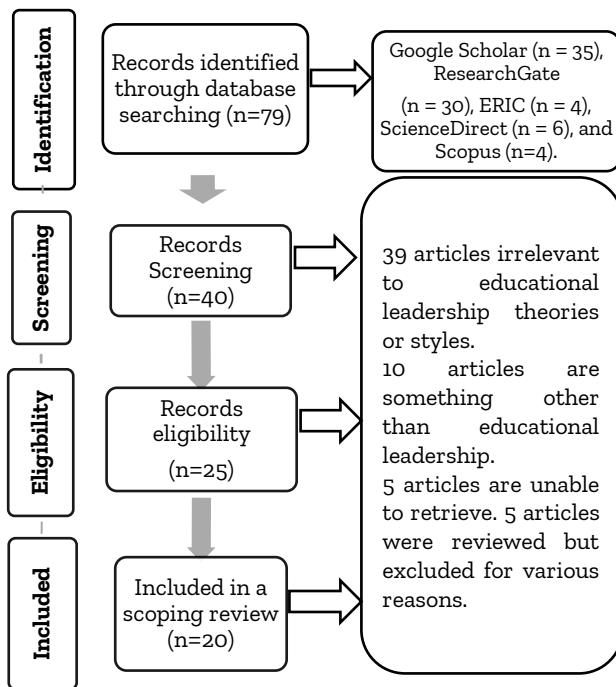

Figure 2. Flow chart of the study.

Figure 2 illustrates the systematic process undertaken to identify, screen, and include studies for a scoping literature review focusing on the theories and styles of educational leadership in schools. This process begins with the identification phase, during which 79 records were identified through a comprehensive search across various databases, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ERIC

ScienceDirect, and Scopus. The first step of the article screening process involved a database search, which identified 79 articles from Google Scholar (n = 35), ResearchGate (n = 30), ERIC (n = 4), ScienceDirect (n = 6), and Scopus (n = 4).

The screening phase involved a detailed assessment of the identified records, reducing the initial pool to 40 documents. This refinement process excluded 39 articles deemed irrelevant to educational leadership theories or styles. Because of 10 articles are something other than educational leadership, and 5 articles are unable to retrieve, the eligibility phase evaluated 25 full-text articles. Among these, 5 articles were reviewed but excluded for various reasons, such as lack of relevance to the research topic or their content not about educational leadership theories or styles. Ultimately, the results culminated in the inclusion phase, a pivotal stage in which 20 studies were deemed suitable for inclusion in the scoping review. This precise and methodical approach ensures the integrity of the research process and enhances the reliability of the findings by adhering to rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria.

To identify the educational leadership theories in school context, a scoping literature review was done on the related articles. Table 1 briefly described 20 articles in the final inclusion identifying key findings related to the theories of educational leadership in school context. The subheadings below illustrate the basic educational leadership theories.

1. Great man theory

The term great man theory has been originally associated with the 19th century Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle (1841) who declared" the history of the world is but the biography of great man". This term "Great Man" was used because, at the time, leadership was thought of primarily as a male quality, especially in terms of military leadership. Great man theory assumes that the capacity for leadership is inherent, that great leaders are born, not made. This theory often portrays leaders as heroic, mythic and destined to rise to leadership when needed. According to this theory, it could be assumed that history was shaped solely through the efforts of great men such as Moses, Churchill, and Lenin (Cherry, 2020, Nawaz, & Khan, 2016, Amanckukwu et al., 2015, Chowdhury, 2014).

Table 1. Summary of the literature on the Key findings of educational leadership theories

Article	Type	Key findings
Lefteri, & Menon, (2025)	Quantitative approach	The results show that transformational and transactional leadership is a strong predictor of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Also have significance for educational policy.
Onan et al., (2025)	Empirical design	Revealed a significant relationship between servant leadership, transformational leadership and psychological resilience.
Hojeij, 2024	A narrative review	This review addresses the need to reassess leadership theories to align with the evolving demands of modern education.
Maqbool et al., (2024)	Quantitative survey method	Leadership styles has a highly positive impact, and autocratic leadership has a moderate impact on sustaining academic performance.
Bwalya, (2023)	Conceptual review	Leadership styles examined include: transformational, transactional, autocratic, laissez-faire, charismatic, servant, democratic and pace-setting leadership.
Gökalp, & Soran, (2022)	Descriptive research	The most effective leadership styles can be found within group dynamics consisting of members who have diverse and individual cultural orientations.
Benmira, & Agboola, (2021)	Narrative review	Explored the historical evolution of leadership theory, which includes four main eras: trait, behavioral, situational and new leadership.
Perera et al., (2021)	Qualitative research	Concludes that understanding the most suitable leadership style is crucial in achieving common goal attainment which is ultimately result in organizational/ school overall success.
Deshwal et al., (2020)	A Systematic Review	Reviewed theories like trait, behavioral, contingency. Also styles like transformational, transactional, authentic, ethical, servant emerged as new dimensions.
Cherry, (2020)	Narrative review	Great leaders don't approach all situations similarly. Instead, they modify their leadership approach based on the group members' maturity level and the situation's demands.
Olowoselu et al., (2019)	A literature review	Education leaders should put in use the path-goal leadership approaches in their daily dealings with their subordinate in their various educational institution.
Al Khajeh, (2018)	Quantitative approach	Identified six major leadership styles -transformational, transactional, autocratic, charismatic, bureaucratic and democratic.
Gandolfi, & Stone, (2018)	Conceptual review	Demonstrate that servant leadership meets the criteria for effective leadership.
Łukowski, (2017)	A literature review	Reviewed directive and participative leadership, interactive, charismatic, transformational, transactional & instrumental leadership.
Nawaz, & Khan, (2016)	A literature review	Main theories that emerged during 20th century include: the great man theory, trait, process leadership theory, style and behavioral theory, transformational, transactional, and laissez faire leadership theory.
Kanodia, & Sacher, (2016)	Qualitative and quantitative review	The key unique leadership traits help every type of personality of leaders to acquire necessary skills.
Amanchukwu et al., (2015)	A literature review	Success is certain if the application of the leadership styles, principles and methods is properly and fully applied in school management.
Sirisookslip et al., (2015)	Quantitative method	There are two types of leadership styles of school administrators, namely supportive leadership and participative leadership styles which have significantly affecting teacher effectiveness.
Piaw, & Ting, (2014)	Descriptive-correlational design	Results show that the majority of the school leaders implemented critical thinking with open leadership style. The findings reject claims that leaders are purely born or purely made.
Boonla, & Treputtharat, (2014)	Correlation research	The relationship between leadership style and school effectiveness of found that there was a positive relationship at medium level.

2. Traits theory

The early 20th century was dominated by "trait theories" of leadership which sought to identify definitive individual characteristics associated with successful leaders. Similar in some ways to Great Man theories, trait theories assume that people inherit certain qualities and traits that make them better suited to leadership. Trait theory believes personality can be understood by positing that all people have certain traits, or characteristic ways of behaving (Benmira, & Agboola, 2021, Deshwal et al., 2020).

The trait theory of leadership suggests that select individuals hare fundamental characteristics that differentiate them from non-leaders. These characteristics include: good interpersonal skills, self-confidence and achievement-orientation, persistence in the pursuit of goals, ability to cope with interpersonal stress and tolerate frustration, and ability to engage in creative problem solving (Cherry, 2020, Kamodia and Sacher, 2016, Lekka et al., 2012, Onyefulu and Kelly, 2012).

3. Behavioral theory

Behavior theory of leadership is based on the belief that great leaders are made, not born. This leadership theory focuses on the actions of leaders not on intellectual qualities or internal states. According to behavior theory you can learn to become a good leader because you are not drawing on personality traits. The behavior theory focuses on identifying styles of leadership conducted by groups of researchers from universities of Lowa, Ohio, and Michigan. The Lowa studies identified two basic leadership styles (Benmira, & Agboola, 2021, Deshwal et al., 2020, Amanckukwu et al., 2015, Kolzow, 2014, Lekka et al., 2012):

1. Autocratic leadership style: the autocratic leaders make the decisions, tells employees what to do, and closely supervises workers.

2. Democratic leadership style: the democratic leaders encourage participation in decisions, work with employees to determine what to do, and does not closely supervise employees.

The study of Ohio state university divided the behaviors of leader into two factors termed: initiating structure; was connected to group performance, and consideration; was related to employee job satisfaction. The study of Michigan University identified two types of leadership behaviors: employee orientation; which focuses on being attentive and considerate of employee needs, and production orientation leadership behaviors; which share much in common with an initiating structure leadership style as they focus on behaviors targeted towards getting the work done.

4. Situational theory

The term "situational leadership" was first introduced by Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard in 1967. The theory was first introduced as "life cycle theory of leadership" and later renamed to situational leadership theory. The theory suggests that the best type of leadership is determined by the specific situation, and that no one style of leadership is appropriate for all given workplace situations (Benmira, & Agboola, 2021, Kolzow, 2014). According to Hersey and Blanchard there are four primary leadership styles (Cherry, 2020, Esther, 2011):

1. Telling (S1). In this leadership style, the leader tells people what to do and how to do it.

2. Selling (S2). This style involves more back-and-forth between leaders and followers. Leaders "sell" their ideas and message to get group members to buy into the process.

3. Participating (S3). In this approach, the leader offers less direction and allows members of the group to take a more active role in coming up with ideas and making decisions.

4. Delegating (S4). This style is characterized by a less involved, hands-off approach to leadership. Group members tend to make most of the decisions and take most of the responsibility for what happens.

To be successful leader, one must quickly recognize the type of leadership to use to each follower as per their situations at hand.

5. Contingency leadership theory

Contingency means "it depends" one thing depends on other things, and for a leader to be effective there must be an appropriate fit between the leader's behavior and style and the followers and the situation. The main idea behind contingency theory is that different situations will demand different styles of leadership. In other words, the best leadership style is contingent on the situation (Deshwal et al., 2020). According to contingency theory, what works for a

leader in one situation may not work in another. This theory attempts to explain why a leader who is very successful in one situation may fail when in another new situation or when the situation changes (Matthews, 2016, Kolzow, 2014).

6. Path-Goal theory

The path-goal leadership theory was developed by Robert House, based on an early version of the theory by M.G.Evans, and published in 1971. House attempted to explain how the behavior of a leader influences the performance and satisfaction of the followers "subordinates". The theory called path-goal, because its major concern is how the leader influences the subordinates' perceptions of their work goals, personal goals and paths to goal attainment. The initial version of the pat-goal theory contained only two broadly defined leader behaviors: supportive leadership (similar to consideration), and directive leadership (similar to initiating structure and instrumental leadership) (Olowoselu et al., 2019, Luthans, 2011, Yukl, 2010). Two other leader behaviors were added in the later by House and Mitchell version of the theory which incorporates four major types, or styles of leadership these are:

1. Directive leadership: associates know exactly what is expected of them, and the leader gives specific directions; there is no participation by subordinates.

2. Supportive leadership: the leader is friendly and approachable and shows a genuine concern for associates.

3. Participative leadership: the leader asks for and uses suggestions from associates but still makes the decisions.

4. Achievement-oriented leadership: the leader sets challenging goals for associates and shows confidence that they will attain these goals and perform well.

7. Participative theory

Participative leadership is defined as leadership that involves employees a cross levels of the hierarchy in decision-making. Participative leadership is the process of having a shared influence in decision-making, by a leader and his or her subordinates. Participative leadership theory assumes that the decision-making processes of the group ought to be the central focus of the group. Participative leadership theory suggests that the ideal leadership style is one that takes the input of the others into account (Amanckukwu et al., 2015, Sirisookslip et al., 2015, Bell et al., 2014, Bush, 2007). Participative leadership theory is underpinned by three assumptions:

- Participation will increase school effectiveness.
- Participation is justified by democratic principles.
- In the context of site-based management, leadership is potentially available to any legitimate stakeholder.

8. Transformational theory

James McGregor Burns first articulated the idea of transformational leadership in 1978 before Bernard Bass expanded on it almost a decade later. Burns argued for leadership that engaged with others to raise intrinsic motivation. Transformational theories also known as Relationship theories, focus upon the connections formed between leaders and followers. Transformational leadership, at its essence, is leadership that moves followers to go beyond simply meeting expectations to reach their full potential and to be extraordinary. Transformational leadership is processes of influencing in which leaders change their associates' awareness of what is important, and move them to see themselves and the opportunities and challenges of their environment in a new way (Lefteri, & Menon, 2025, Bwalya, 2023, Burgess, 2016, Tesfaw, 2014). According to Bass (1985) which built ideas of transformational leadership upon Burn's, there are four factors or types of leadership behaviors that are classified as transformational:

1. Idealized Influence (II): indicates whether leaders hold subordinates' trust, maintain their faith and respect, show dedication to them, appeal to their hopes and dreams, and act as their role model.

2. Inspirational Motivation (IM): to be inspirational means to be positive, upbeat, and inspiring about the future. These leaders look at the future in an optimistic way and are able to get their followers excited about it.

3. Intellectual Stimulation (IS): referred to leaders who challenged their followers' ideas and values for solving problems.

4. Individual Consideration (IC): as a feature of a transformational leader, is reduced to the ability of individual analysis of followers. Namely, inclusion of followers into the transformation process of an organization implies the need to diagnose their wishes, needs, values and abilities in the right way.

Therefore, transformational leaders seek new ways of working, seek opportunities in the face of risk, prefer effective answers to efficient answers, and are less likely to support the status quo.

9. Transactional theory

In 1947, Max Weber was the first to describe rational-legal leadership, the style that would come to be known as transactional leadership- as" the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge". Transactional leadership theory is based on the idea that managers give employees something they want in exchange for getting something they want. Transactional leadership also known as managerial leadership focuses on the role of supervision, organization, and group performance. Managerial leadership assumes that the focus of leaders ought to be on functions, tasks and behaviors and that if these functions are carried out competently the work of others in the organization will be facilitated (Lefteri, & Menon, 2025, Bwalya, 2023, Spahr, 2016, Campbell, 2011). According to Bass, there are several different types of behavior inherent in transactional leadership:

1. Contingent Reward (CR): leader provides contingent rewards for good effort, performance, and recognizes accomplishment in order to reinforce appropriate behaviors and discourage in appropriate behaviors.

2. Management by Exception (MBE): leader maintains the status quo, intervenes when subordinates do not meet acceptable performance levels, and initiates corrective action to improve performance.

3. Laissez-faire leadership (LF): measures whether leaders require little of others, are content to let things ride, and let others do their own thing.

Therefore, transactional leaders usually guide or motivate followers in the direction of their goals by clarifying role and task requirements.

10. Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, first proposed by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, is a theoretical framework that advocates a leader's primary motivation and role as service to others. Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy where the primary goal of the leader is to serve others, rather than to accumulate power or authority. The leader's focus is on the well-being and growth of their team members, ensuring that their needs are met, fostering a sense of community, and empowering others to perform at their best (Bwalya, 2023, Deshwal et al., 2020, Smith, 2005, Greenleaf, 1977). Servant-leadership, therefore, emphasizes core personal characteristics and beliefs over any specific leadership techniques. This is seen throughout the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf. Behavioral theorists have identified 10 major leadership characteristics, or 'attributes' in Greenleaf's writings:

1. Listening: A critical communication tool, necessary for accurate communication and for actively demonstrating respect for others.

2. Empathy: The ability to mentally project one's own consciousness into that of another individual.

3. Healing: Defined as "to make whole". The servant leader recognizes the shared human desire to find wholeness in one's self, and supports it in others.

4. Awareness: Without awareness, we miss leadership opportunities.

5. Persuasion: The effective servant-leader builds group consensus through "gentle but clear and persistent persuasion, and does not exert group compliance through position power.

6. Conceptualization: The servant-leader can conceive solutions to problems that do not currently exist.

7. Foresight: Prescience, or foresight, is a better than average guess about what is going to happen when in the future.

8. Stewardship: Organizational stewards, or 'trustees' are concerned not only for the individual followers within the organization, but also the organization as a whole, and its impact on and relationship with all of society.

9. Commitment to the growth of people: A demonstrated appreciation and encouragement of others.

10. Building community. The rise of large institutions has eroded community, the social pact that unites individuals in society.

CONCLUSION

The scoping literature review seeks to consolidate existing research on the educational leadership theories in the school context. This paper has significant implication for school principals' by adding to understanding that educational leadership is not only managing, directing, and controlling, but it is a process requires many characteristics, and

attempts to create change in the educational institution.

This paper contributes to the body of educational leadership literature reviews by emphasizing the importance of theories of leadership in school context which could be summarized as leadership is innate in one side, and both innate and acquired learning in other. By learning and acquiring skills any individual can became a leader. No one style a leader can follow at all situations, but leader can use different styles depending on the situation to influence followers to path to goal attainment with involving in decision-making process. Besides, great leaders focus on serving the needs, growth of the followers, and empowering them to perform at their best, which lead to achieve the objectives perfectly.

This paper recommends the necessity of raising awareness of educational administers', school principals', and teachers about the importance of practicing educational leadership through workshops and training courses. Besides, future research should focus on application of each of leadership theory in the education context. Additionally, the paper suggests several future directions, including the need to incorporate latest AI technologies in applications of leadership theories in education context, and enhance research quality of educational leadership through mixed methods.

▪▪ DECLARATIONS

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