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LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES OF SCHOOL HEADS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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The article analysis leadership competencies such as instructional leadership, emotional intelligence, strategic and change leadership, digital and virtual leadership, and culturally responsive leadership. These competencies are examined across diverse educational content and are aligned with established leadership theories. The study aims to inform leadership development programs, human resource practices, and policy formulation by providing a comprehensive understanding of the skills and attributes that define successful school leaders in the 21st century.

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review explores the leadership competencies needed for effective school headship in educational institutions. This was crafted from 30 qualitative and mixed-method studies published between 2020 and 2024, the review synthesizes findings across different educational content using the PRISMA framework. Thematic analysis revealed nine core leadership competencies, namely: instructional leadership, emotional intelligence, strategic and change leadership, digital and virtual leadership, culturally responsive leadership, professional development, organizational and human resource management, visionary leadership, and crisis resilience. These competencies are necessary in resolving the evolving demands of 21st-century education. The findings align with established leadership theories and offer practical implications for leadership training, policy development, and human resource practices in schools. This review contributes to a deeper understanding of the different nature of school leadership and provides a grounded basis for improving leadership and development programs.

KEYWORDS: *School Leadership, Leadership Competencies, Instructional Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, Educational Management*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the educational institutions, effective leadership is widely recognized as an important factor in achieving school success. School heads, often referred to as principals or school leaders, are at the forefront of managing both instructional and administrative responsibilities. Their ability to lead with competence directly influences teacher performance, student achievement, and the overall school climate. As educational systems continue to evolve in response to societal, technological, and policy changes, the expectations placed on school heads have expanded. They are no longer seen merely as administrators but as visionary leaders who must possess a wide range of competencies to solve problems within educational environments. These competencies include, but are not limited to, instructional leadership, emotional intelligence, strategic decision-making, and effective communication.

Given the increasing demands on school leadership, it is important to identify the specific competencies that contribute to effective school headship. While different studies have explored the factors of school leadership, there is a need to synthesize qualitative evidence that captures the lived experiences and contextual realities of school heads. This is particularly important in the field of educational management, where leadership development and human resource practices must be informed by grounded, evidence-based insights.

This systematic literature review aims to address this need by answering the research question:

1. What leadership competencies are needed for effective school headship in educational institutions?

Background of the Study

Leadership in educational institutions plays an important role in shaping school culture improving teaching quality and student outcomes. Among the different leadership roles in schools, the school head or principal is considered the central figure in driving institutional success. As such, understanding the competencies that define effective school leadership is important for both policy and practice in educational management.

Leadership competencies refer to the combination of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes that enable individuals to perform their leadership roles effectively (Chow & Singh, 2023). In the context of school leadership, these competencies often include instructional leadership, strategic thinking, emotional

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intelligence, communication, decision-making, and the ability to foster collaboration among teachers. These competencies are not only critical for managing day-to-day operations but also for leading school improvement initiatives and responding to complex educational challenges.

Recent studies have emphasized the evolving nature of school leadership, especially in response to the demands of the 21st century. For instance, Aquino et al. (2021) highlighted how school heads in the Philippines demonstrated leadership through mentoring, information-sharing, and fostering supportive environments, which significantly influenced teacher performance. Similarly, Espiritu (2021) explored the "new normal" leadership competencies of school heads, showing how these influenced decision-making styles and organizational trust.

Theoretical frameworks such as Transformational Leadership and Instructional Leadership continue to guide the understanding of effective school leadership. These models emphasize the importance of visionary, emotionally intelligent, and pedagogically grounded leadership. In the context of the pandemic, school heads were also found to exhibit strategic leadership by managing remote learning and supporting teachers and parents as learning facilitators (Pagdilao & Paguyo, 2023).

Despite the growing body of literature on school leadership, there remains a need to systematically synthesize qualitative evidence on what competencies are most needed for school heads. Many studies explore leadership in different contexts, but few consolidate these findings to provide a clear, evidence-based understanding of the core competencies required. This systematic literature review aims to fill that gap by focusing on qualitative research that captures the lived experiences, perceptions, and practices of school heads across different educational settings.

By identifying and analyzing the leadership competencies emphasized in qualitative studies, this review seeks to inform leadership development programs, human resource policies, and future research in educational management. The findings will provide a grounded understanding of what makes school heads effective leaders, particularly in the context of human resource management in educational institutions (Azukas, 2022).

II. METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009; Snyder, 2019). The SLR method was selected to ensure a transparent, rigorous, and replicable process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing qualitative evidence on leadership competencies essential for effective school headship. This approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of existing literature, focusing on the lived experiences, perceptions, and practices of school leaders across diverse educational contexts. The review process involved three key phases: planning, conducting, and reporting, all aimed at addressing the central research question: What leadership competencies are essential for effective school headship in educational institutions?

Search Strategy, Screening, and Selection Process

A systematic search was conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and institutional repositories. Keywords used in the search included combinations of terms such as "school leadership," "leadership competencies," "school heads," "principals," "instructional leadership," "emotional intelligence," "strategic leadership," and "qualitative study." The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and conference proceedings published between 2020 and 2024 to ensure relevance and recency.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to guide the selection process:

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies published between 2020 and 2024.	Studies published before 2020.
Qualitative or mixed-method studies with a qualitative focus.	Purely quantitative studies.
Focus on school leadership competencies.	Studies not related to school leadership.
English-language publications.	Non-English publications.
Studies involving school heads, principals, or administrators.	Studies focusing solely on students or non-leadership roles.

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A total of 110 articles were initially identified. After removing duplicates and applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 30 studies were selected for full review and thematic synthesis.

Literature Selection Process (PRISMA Flow)

The selection process followed the PRISMA flow, which includes four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. A visual for the PRISMA diagram is presented below for clearer understanding:

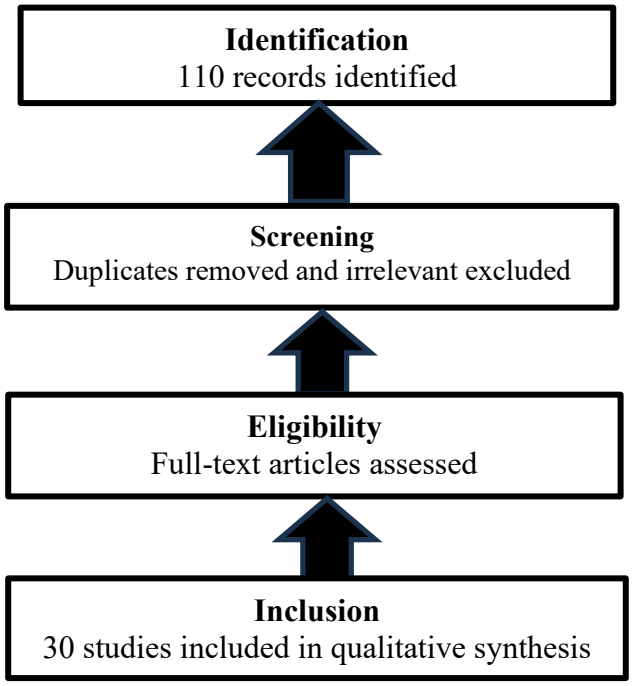


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Literature Selection Process

Data Extraction and Analysis

To ensure consistency and rigor in synthesizing the selected studies, a standardized data extraction form was developed. This form captured essential information from each article, including the author(s), year of publication, title, research design, country of origin, and key findings related to leadership competencies. The extracted data were then organized and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and categorize the competencies into meaningful themes.

Table 1 presents a summary of the 30 studies included in the review. It outlines the bibliographic details, methodological approaches, geographical contexts, and the leadership competencies emphasized in each study.

Table 1. Summary of Included Studies with Authors, Year, Title, Research Design, Country, and Key Findings of the Study

Author(s)	Year	Title	Research Design	Country	Key Findings
Acton, K. S.	2020	School leaders as change agents: Do principals have the tools they need?	Qualitative	Global	Change leadership, instructional leadership
Adams, D., & Velarde, J. M.	2020	Leadership in a culturally diverse environment	Qualitative	Malaysia	Culturally responsive leadership
Alanezi, A.	2022	Toxic leadership behaviors of school principals	Qualitative	Global	Toxic leadership behaviors
Alene, A. A.	2022	Primary school leaders' practice of making schools as learning organization	Qualitative	Ethiopia	Learning organizations

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Aquino, C. J. C., Afalla, B. T., & Fabelico, F. L.	2021	Managing educational institutions: School heads' leadership practices	Qualitative	Philippines	Instructional leadership, HR management
Azukas, M. E.	2022	Leading Remotely: Competencies required for virtual leadership	Qualitative	Global	Virtual leadership
Bantolo, K. H. J.	2021	School heads' competencies and school performance	Qualitative	Global	Instructional leadership, HR management
Brinkmann, J. L., Cash, C., & Price, T.	2021	Crisis leadership and coaching	Qualitative	Global	Crisis leadership, self-efficacy
Bukko, D., Liu, K., & Johnson, A. H.	2021	Principal practices that build and sustain trust	Qualitative	Global	Trust-building
Chiza, R. L.	2023	Principals' role in the development of middle school teacher leaders	Qualitative	Global	Teacher leadership development
Crawford, T. M.	2024	Middle school assistant principals as instructional leaders	Qualitative	Global	Instructional leadership
Espiritu, M.	2021	New Normal Leadership Competencies of School Heads	Qualitative	Global	Leadership competencies in the new normal
Gómez-Leal, R., Holzer, A. A., Bradley, C., Fernández-Berrocal, P., & Patti, J.	2021	Emotional intelligence and leadership in school leaders	Qualitative	Global	Emotional intelligence, trust-building
Karakose, T., Polat, H., & Papadakis, S.	2021	Digital leadership roles during COVID-19	Qualitative	Turkey	Digital leadership, tech-based professional development
Kenayathulla, H. B., Ghani, M. F. A., & Radzi, N. M.	2024	Enhancing quality appointment and support for Malaysian principals	Qualitative	Malaysia	Professional development
Keykha, A., Rahmani Barouji, P., & Ezati, M.	2022	Identifying the Competencies of School Principals	Qualitative	Iran	Organizational, financial, and technical skills
Kudlats, J., & La-Serna, J.	2023	Cultivating Leadership Identity	Qualitative	Global	Leadership identity development
Montecinos, C., Cortez, M., Zoro, B., & Zett, I.	2022	Senior leaders' theories of action	Qualitative	Global	Strategic leadership
Nhlumayo, B. S.	2024	Leadership strategies for ICT integration	Qualitative	Global	ICT integration
Okilwa, N. S. A., & Barnett, B.	2024	Social-emotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic	Qualitative	USA	Social-emotional leadership
Pagdilao, A., & Paguyo, Z.	2023	Leadership amidst the pandemic	Qualitative	Philippines	Crisis leadership

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Powell, A. M.	2022	Technology leadership competencies in school leaders	Qualitative	Global	Technology leadership
Sahlin, S.	2023	Professional development of school principals	Qualitative	Sweden	Lifelong learning, peer collaboration
Savvopoulos, D., Saiti, A., & Arar, K.	2022	Inclusion and culturally responsive leadership	Qualitative	Global	Culturally responsive leadership
Skousen, J. D., Weiler, S. C., Boren, D., Pesci, B., Johnson, A., Antivilo, K., Averett, J., Heaton, T. R., & Crandall, N.	2024	Reflections about Educational Leadership	Qualitative	Global	Transformational leadership
So-Oabeb, J., & Du Plessis, A.	2023	Leadership competencies for teacher development	Qualitative	Namibia	Teacher professional development
Stasiunaitiene, E., & Nedzinskaite-Maciuniene, R.	2024	Role of school principals in implementing UDL	Qualitative	Global	Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
Yoder, J. D.	2024	Change leadership training and instructional leadership	Qualitative	USA	Change leadership, instructional leadership
Azukas, M. E.	2022	Leading Remotely: Competencies required for virtual leadership	Qualitative	Global	Virtual leadership, remote management
Espiritu, M.	2021	New Normal Leadership Competencies of School Heads	Qualitative	Global	New normal leadership, decision-making, organizational trust

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This systematic literature review synthesized findings from 30 studies, including 26 qualitative and four (4) mixed-methods studies with a qualitative emphasis. The studies span diverse educational contexts and collectively highlight the essential leadership competencies required for effective school headship. The findings are organized into nine thematic categories:

1. **Instructional and Academic Leadership.** Instructional leadership emerged as a foundational competency across different studies. School heads are expected to guide curriculum implementation, mentor teachers, and monitor instructional practices to ensure academic excellence. Bantolo (2021), Chiza (2023), and Yoder (2024) emphasized that principals who actively engage in instructional leadership significantly influence student achievement and teacher development. These leaders act as visionaries and instructional coaches, aligning teaching practices with school goals.
2. **Emotional Intelligence and Trust-Building**. Emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, empathy, and relationship-building, is necessary for fostering a positive school climate. Gómez-Leal et al. (2021) found that emotionally intelligent leaders improve teacher satisfaction and performance. Bukko et al. (2021) further emphasized that trust-building behaviors, such as honesty, openness, and reliability, are needed for sustaining high-functioning school environments and retaining teachers.
3. **Strategic Thinking and Change Leadership.** Strategic leadership and the ability to manage change are needed in the changing educational landscape. Acton (2020) and Yoder (2024) noted that while many principals initially lacked formal training in change management, professional development significantly improved their confidence and effectiveness. These leaders are expected to implement reforms, set strategic goals, and lead school improvement initiatives.

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4. **Digital and Virtual Leadership.** The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of digital leadership. Karakose et al. (2021), Powell (2022), and Okilwa and Barnett (2024) revealed that school leaders needed to adapt quickly to virtual learning environments. Competencies such as digital technology integration, support for digital transformation, and fostering a digital learning culture are all needed for maintaining instructional continuity and supporting teacher development.

5. **Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Leadership.** Leading in multicultural and diverse environments requires culturally responsive leadership. Adams and Velarde (2020), Savvopoulos et al. (2022), and Kudlats and La-Serna (2023) emphasized the importance of inclusivity, moral leadership, and understanding different student needs. These leaders promote equity, foster inclusive school cultures, and address the unique challenges of different learners.

6. **Professional Development and Lifelong Learning.** Continuous professional development is also important for sustaining leadership effectiveness. Sahlin (2023) and Kenayathulla et al. (2024) highlighted the value of ongoing learning, peer collaboration, and institutional support. These studies suggest that experienced principals benefit from reflective and collaborative learning opportunities that improve their leadership capacity.

7. **Organizational and Human Resource Management.** Effective school leadership also requires strong organizational and HR management skills. Keykha et al. (2022) and Nhlumayo (2024) identified competencies such as team building, teacher evaluation, and operational efficiency as essential. These skills enable school heads to manage resources strategically and foster a collaborative and productive work environment.

8. **Visionary and Transformational Leadership.** Transformational leadership traits such as setting a shared vision, motivating staff, and fostering innovation were evident in studies by Montecinos et al. (2022) and Skousen et al. (2024). These leaders inspire their teams, cultivate a shared sense of purpose, and drive long-term school improvement through empowerment and collaboration.

9. **Crisis and Resilience Leadership.** The ability to lead during crises, particularly during the pandemic, was another critical competency. Brinkmann et al. (2021) and Okilwa and Barnett (2024) emphasized the importance of resilience, adaptability, and emotional support. Leaders who practiced self-care, maintained open communication, and supported the well-being of staff and students were more effective in resolving emergencies.

Cross-Study Comparisons

While instructional leadership and emotional intelligence were universally emphasized, other competencies, such as digital leadership and culturally responsive leadership, were more context-specific. For instance, digital leadership was more prominent in technologically advanced or pandemic-affected settings, while inclusive leadership was emphasized in international and multicultural schools.

These findings align with different established leadership theories. The emphasis on vision-setting and motivation reflects transformational leadership theory. The focus on curriculum and teacher support aligns with instructional leadership theory, while the collaborative nature of leadership in many studies supports distributed leadership theory.

Implications

The findings have significant implications for leadership training, human resource practices, and policy development. Leadership programs should integrate emotional intelligence, digital leadership, and change management. Human resource practices must prioritize leaders with strong interpersonal and strategic skills. Policymakers should support continuous professional development and provide resources for inclusive and crisis-responsive leadership.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This systematic literature review synthesized insights from 30 qualitative and mixed-method studies to identify the needed leadership competencies required for practical school headship in educational institutions. The analysis revealed nine core categories of competencies: instructional leadership, emotional intelligence, strategic and change leadership, digital and virtual leadership, culturally responsive leadership, professional development, organizational and human resource management, visionary leadership, and crisis resilience. These competencies are foundational to the different roles of school leaders and are important in addressing the evolving demands of contemporary education systems.

Instructional leadership and emotional intelligence emerged as universally emphasized competencies, which reflected the importance of guiding teaching and learning while fostering positive interpersonal relationships within the school community. Meanwhile, competencies such as digital leadership and culturally responsive leadership were more context-specific, reflecting the influence of technological advancements and diverse school environments. The findings also align with established leadership theories, including transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership, which support the theoretical grounding of effective school leadership practices.

Recommendation

In light of the findings, several recommendations are proposed for different stakeholders in the education sector.

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1. **Leadership training institutions** may incorporate comprehensive modules for training programs on emotional intelligence, digital leadership, and change management. These programs might emphasize experiential learning, mentoring, and reflective practice to build real-world leadership capacity. Furthermore, culturally responsive leadership and inclusive education practices may be included as core components of leadership development curricula.

2. **School systems and human resource departments** may prioritize the recruitment and promotion of school leaders who demonstrate a balanced set of instructional, strategic, and interpersonal competencies. Continuous professional development opportunities may be provided, tailored to the evolving needs of school leaders, including training in crisis management and digital transformation. Establishing mentorship programs and peer-learning networks can further support leadership growth and sustainability.

3. **Policymakers and educational authorities** may encouraged to develop and implement policies that support the holistic development of school leaders. This includes allocating funding for leadership training, fostering professional learning communities, and encouraging collaboration between schools, industries, and community organizations. In addition, leadership standards and evaluation frameworks may recognize the importance of self-care and well-being, which are often overlooked but needed for sustained leadership effectiveness.

4. **Future researchers** may explore the long-term impact of specific leadership competencies on school performance through longitudinal studies. Further investigation may be needed into the development of leadership identity and its correlation with effectiveness, particularly in diverse educational settings.

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