# School Governance and Educational Leadership for Sustainable School Improvement: A Systematic Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) examines contemporary research on school governance and educational leadership for sustainable school improvement, focusing on studies published between 2024 and 2026. This review addresses the growing need for schools to strengthen governance, leadership capacity, accountability, inclusiveness, and long-term improvement. Using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, articles were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC through advanced searching strategies. After the screening and eligibility process, 30 primary studies were selected for final analysis. The Quality Assessment (QA) revealed that 24 articles were classified as high quality, and six as moderate quality. The findings were organized into three major themes: (1) Collaborative and Inclusive Leadership for School Improvement, which highlights distributed leadership, stakeholder participation, family engagement, and inclusive culture; (2) Governance, Accountability and Evidence-Informed School Improvement, which focuses on policy alignment, school inspection, data use, research-informed decision-making, and accountability; and (3) Sustainable School Development, Resilience, and Leadership Capacity, which emphasizes professional learning, organizational resilience, digital transformation, leadership development, and continuous improvement. Overall, the review concludes that sustainable school improvement is strengthened when governance, collaborative leadership, evidence-informed practices, and leadership capacity work together. The findings suggest that schools need supportive governance structures, shared decision-making, professional trust, and adaptive leadership systems to sustain improvement over time.

**Keywords:** School governance; Educational leadership; Sustainable school improvement; Collaborative Leadership, Evidence- Informed Decision-Making

## INTRODUCTION

School governance and educational leadership have become central to efforts to achieve sustainable school improvement, especially in the context of global agendas such as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning. Leadership is now viewed less as an individual position and more as an organizational capacity that shapes vision, culture, and conditions for effective teaching and learning (Aquino et al., 2021; Ghamrawi, 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Mincu, 2022). Sustainable improvement requires schools to function as coherent organizations, rather than mere collections of individual classrooms.

Research consistently demonstrates that effective leadership, particularly instructional and distributed leadership, is a prerequisite for lasting school reform and higher student achievement. Principals and other leaders shape a shared vision of success, foster collaborative cultures, cultivate leadership in others, and focus on teaching and learning quality as the core of improvement (Batool et al., 2021; Gaol, 2021; Kaso et al., 2021; Maqbool et al., 2024; Shava et al., 2021). Different leadership styles (democratic, delegative, collaborative) and behaviors (planning, organizing, monitoring, support) contribute to better teacher performance and student outcomes when used flexibly and contextually (Pardosi & Utari, 2022).

Governance structures and processes provide the framework within which leadership operates. School governing bodies, accountability systems, and strategic planning processes influence school autonomy, decision-making, and the implementation of improvement initiatives (Priyambodo & Hasanah, 2021; Verhelst et al., 2021). Democratic decision-making, pluralistic communication, and shared vision are highlighted as core organizational features of schools that effectively advance education for sustainable development and maintain long-term change (Van Den Boom-Muilenburg et al., 2021; Verhelst et al., 2021). When governance remains overly centralized or symbolic, it can limit meaningful participation and constrain schools' capacity to innovate (Ghamrawi, 2023; Mincu, 2022).

Sustainability of improvement also depends on how leadership responds to complexity, crisis, and change. Studies of crisis leadership during COVID-19 and of long-term professional learning communities indicate that leaders' values, beliefs, and interpretations strongly shape whether innovations endure or fade over time (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Demeshkant et al., 2022; Hanafi et al., 2021; Van Den Boom-Muilenburg et al., 2021). Sustainable leadership is described as holistic, future-oriented, and attentive to resources, relationships, and school culture, linking day-to-day decisions with long-term educational and societal goals (Daly et al., 2025).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

School governance and educational leadership are increasingly viewed as connected elements in promoting sustainable school improvement. Recent studies indicate that school improvement is related to student achievement, governance quality, leadership capacity, collaboration, inclusion, and organizational sustainability. Supriadi et al. (2021) explained that good school governance consists of transparency, accountability, responsibility, autonomy, fairness, and participation. Tian and Huber (2020) also highlighted that educational leadership research has moved toward accountability, democratic values, instructional leadership, and distributed leadership. Meanwhile, Tri et al. (2025) asserted that school-based management research is closely linked with governance, autonomy, school leadership, and effectiveness.

A major trend in recent literature is the shift from individual principal leadership to distributed and team-based leadership. Benoliel (2021) established that effective school management teams support school improvement by strengthening teamwork, academic emphasis, and a safe learning environment. Karakose et al. (2022) also noted that distributed leadership research has expanded beyond school effectiveness to include innovation, instructional leadership, and capacity-building. Choi (2023) further explained that distributed leadership improves teacher self-efficacy through feedback networks and school capacity building. Collectively, these studies suggest that sustainable school improvement requires shared leadership practices rather than relying on a single principal.

Good school governance is also strongly related to collaboration among school stakeholders. Mohapi and Chombo (2021) discovered that cooperation between principals, parents, and teacher governors is important for school effectiveness, although role overlap and limited resources can weaken governance practices. Gómez-hurtado et al. (2021) posited that inclusive leadership promotes collaborative culture, community participation, and recognition of student diversity. Hovardas et al. (2026) also emphasized stakeholder and learner engagement in open schooling projects, especially through distributed leadership and participatory design. Together, these findings indicate that sustainable improvement becomes stronger when governance structures allow meaningful participation from teachers, parents, learners, and wider communities.

Recent studies also suggest that accountability can support or weaken school improvement, depending on how it is practiced. Bravo and Ogaz (2021) highlighted that accountability policies in Chile increased academic monitoring, though they did not significantly improve teacher support. Paletta (2019) argued that accountability can become useful only when school leaders integrate it into professional learning community practices rather than treating it as bureaucracy. Wade (2026) added that accountability-driven parent engagement can create emotional labor, especially for women school leaders. Therefore, sustainable school improvement requires accountability systems that support learning, trust, and professional development, rather than systems that only increase pressure and administrative workload.

Professional learning and leadership capacity are important conditions for sustainable school improvement. Acton (2021) underscored that many principals felt underprepared to lead change due to limited formal professional development. Bush and Anania (2023) stated that instructional leadership training in Tanzania improved leaders' understanding of vision, mission, classroom observation, and distributed leadership. Lynch et al. (2024) also noted that principals' ability to support teacher professional learning is influenced by their own learning engagement, confidence, and organizational constraints. In general, these studies suggest that school governance must include continuous leadership development, as sustainable improvement depends on leaders prepared to guide change, support teachers, and manage complexity.

The reviewed literature also identifies several gaps for future research. Although many studies discuss governance, leadership, and school improvement, fewer studies examine how these elements work together over time in different contexts. Godfrey and Munoz-Chereau (2024) revealed that school improvement partnerships can build organizational resilience through trust, knowledge sharing, and professional accountability. Harder and Schumann (2025) highlighted the growing importance of innovative school management in digital transformation. Timan et al. (2026) introduced green digital school management as a new direction for sustainable school governance. Future research should therefore examine the long-term relationship between good governance, leadership capacity, digital transformation, inclusion, and sustainable school improvement.

# RESEARCH QUESTION

Research questions play an important role in a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), as they provide the foundation and direction for the entire review process. They help determine the scope, focus, and boundaries of the review, including the criteria for selecting and excluding studies. Clear research questions also ensure that the literature search is conducted systematically and comprehensively, enabling relevant studies on the topic to be identified and analyzed. This process helps reduce bias and supports a more complete understanding of existing evidence. In addition, research questions help organize data from the selected studies and provide a clear structure for analyzing, comparing, and synthesizing findings. Thus, well-developed research questions improve the clarity, transparency, and reproducibility of the review while ensuring that the findings remain aligned with the study's objectives.

In the planning stage of an SLR, formulating research questions is a crucial step, as it guides the overall review methodology. According to Kitchenham (2007), research questions influence the search strategy, selection criteria, data extraction process, and synthesis of findings. In this study, the research questions were developed to identify and analyze the current state of knowledge related to school governance and educational leadership for sustainable school improvement. To ensure that the research questions were clearly structured, the PICo framework proposed by Lockwood et al. (2015) was applied. PICo is commonly used in qualitative and review-based studies to formulate focused and systematic research questions.

The PICo framework consists of three main elements, namely Population, Interest, and Context. Population refers to the group or participants that become the focus of the study, such as school leaders, principals, teachers, school management teams, or school stakeholders. Interest refers to the main phenomenon or issue being investigated, such as school governance, educational leadership, accountability, professional learning, stakeholder participation, and sustainable school improvement. Context refers to the setting or environment in which the issue is studied, such as schools, school systems, or educational institutions undergoing improvement and transformation. By employing the PICo framework, the research questions can be developed more

systematically, making the review more focused, organized, and relevant to the study objectives. Based on this framework, this study developed the following research questions:

1. How do collaborative and inclusive leadership practices among school leaders, teachers, and stakeholders contribute to school improvement?
2. How do governance, accountability, and evidence-informed practices support sustainable school improvement in school contexts?
3. How do sustainable school development, organizational resilience, and leadership capacity strengthen long-term school improvement?

# MATERIAL AND METHODS

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), as explained by Page et al. (2021) is widely used as a standard guideline in conducting SLRs. This method supports a transparent, comprehensive, and consistent review process. By following PRISMA, researchers can improve the accuracy and quality of their analysis since the guideline provides a systematic procedure for identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies. PRISMA also helps reduce bias by ensuring that the review process is clearly documented and based on predetermined criteria. In this review, Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC were selected since they offer broad coverage and are considered reliable sources of academic literature.

The PRISMA framework generally involves four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and data extraction. The identification stage involves searching selected databases to find studies related to the research topic. Following this, the screening stage involves applying predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria to remove studies that are not relevant or do not meet the required quality standards. During the eligibility stage, the remaining studies are examined in greater detail to ensure they meet the review requirements. Finally, the data extraction stage involves collecting, organizing, and synthesizing key information from the selected studies. This systematic process helps produce a more rigorous and trustworthy review, which can contribute to future research and practical understanding.

## *Identification*

In this study, the main procedures of the systematic review process were applied to obtain a wide range of relevant literature. The process began with selecting suitable keywords, followed by identifying related terms using dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopedias, and previous studies. Subsequently, all relevant terms were organized and used to construct search strings for the Scopus, WoS, and ERIC databases, as summarized in Table 1. During this initial stage of the systematic review, 843 publications on the study topic were retrieved from the three databases.

**Table 1: The Search String**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Scopus** | TITLE-ABS-KEY ( ( "school governance" OR "educational governance" OR "school-based management" OR "school management" OR accountability OR transparency OR participation ) AND ( "educational leadership" OR "school leadership" OR "principal leadership" OR "distributed leadership" OR "instructional leadership" ) AND ( "school improvement" OR "school effectiveness" OR "school quality" OR sustainability OR "sustainable development" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "SOCI" ) OR LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "ARTS" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( DOCTYPE , "ar" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "English" ) ) AND PUBYEAR > 2024 AND PUBYEAR < 2026<br>**Date of Access: April 2026** |
| **WoS** | ("school governance" OR "educational governance" OR "school-based management" OR "school management" OR accountability OR transparency OR participation) (Topic) AND ("educational leadership" OR "school leadership" OR "principal leadership" OR "distributed |

| | |
|---|---|
| | leadership" OR "instructional leadership") (Topic) AND ("school improvement" OR "school effectiveness" OR "school quality" OR sustainability OR "sustainable development") (Topic) and 2026 or 2025 or 2024 (Publication Years) and Article (Document Types) and English (Languages) and Psychology or Education Educational Research (Research Areas)<br>**Date of Access: April 2026** |
| **ERIC** | (("school governance" OR "educational governance" OR "school-based management" OR accountability OR transparency OR participation) AND ("educational leadership" OR "school leadership" OR "principal leadership" OR "distributed leadership") AND ("school improvement" OR "school effectiveness" OR "school quality" OR sustainability)) AND (rtype.exact("Article") AND la.exact("ENG") AND pd(20240101-20260427))<br>**Date of Access: April 2026** |

The identification stage is the first step in the SLR process. In this study, the identification process was conducted by searching three main academic databases: Scopus, WoS, and ERIC. These databases were selected since they provide broad access to scholarly publications in the field of education, educational leadership, school governance, school effectiveness, and school improvement. The search was guided by the main keywords of this study: school governance, educational leadership, and sustainable school improvement.

Based on the search results, 843 records were identified across the three databases. Specifically, 248 records were retrieved from Scopus, 222 records from WoS, and 373 records from ERIC. ERIC produced the most records, indicating its relevance as a database focused on education-related literature. Meanwhile, Scopus and WoS also contributed a considerable number of records, as both databases cover multidisciplinary publications and index academic publications.

The total number of records obtained at this stage represents the initial pool of literature before the screening process. Therefore, the 843 records do not represent the final number of articles included in the review. Some records may appear more than once across the three databases, while some publications may not fully align with the study's focus after further review. The next stage of the review process involved removing duplicate records and screening titles, abstracts, and keywords. This ensures that only studies relevant to school governance, educational leadership, and sustainable school improvement were retained for further analysis.

### *Screening*

The screening stage was conducted after the identification process to refine the initial search results and ensure that only studies relevant to the review focus were retained. In this stage, several exclusion criteria were applied to the total 843 records identified from Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC. Records were excluded if they were non-English publications, published before 2024, or categorized as conference papers, books, reviews, in-press articles, and other document types. The decision to limit the publication period to 2024–2026 was made to ensure that the review focused on the most recent developments in school governance and educational leadership, particularly in relation to post-pandemic educational recovery, digital transformation, inclusive leadership, organizational resilience, and sustainable school improvement. This timeframe was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine current and emerging trends rather than provide a historical overview of the field. Although earlier studies remain relevant, the selected period allowed the review to concentrate on recent evidence that reflects contemporary policy expectations and school-level challenges. Studies outside the relevant subject areas were also removed. Only studies classified within Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, or other closely related education-focused areas were retained when they were directly relevant to the review focus. This step was important to ensure that the remaining records were recent, relevant, and suitable for analyzing school governance, educational leadership, and sustainable school improvement.

After applying these screening criteria, the number of records was reduced from 843 to 79. Specifically, 38 records were retained from Scopus, 34 from WoS, and seven from ERIC. This reduction suggests that many publications identified during the first stage did not fully meet the scope and criteria of the review. Although ERIC produced the most records during the identification stage, only a small number remained after screening.

This may be because many ERIC records did not meet the year, document type, language, or subject-area criteria. In contrast, Scopus contributed the highest number of retained records after screening, followed by WoS, indicating that both databases provided more records that matched the specific requirements of this review.

The next step was to examine for duplicate records across the three databases. Since the same article can be indexed in multiple databases, duplicate removal is necessary to avoid counting the same study multiple times. During this process, 26 duplicate papers were identified and removed. As a result, the final number of records retained for the next stage was 53 papers. These 53 papers represent a more refined set of literature that passed the initial screening and duplication process. Consequently, they were considered suitable to proceed to the next stage of the systematic review, where the articles would be assessed more closely based on their titles, abstracts, keywords, and relevance to the study topic.

**Table 2: The Search Selection Criteria**

| Criterion | Inclusion | Exclusion |
|---|---|---|
| **Language** | English | Non-English |
| **Timeline** | 2024 – 2026 | < 2024 |
| **Literature type** | Journal (Article) | Conference, Book, Review |
| **Study Area** | Social Science<br>Art & Humanities | Besides Social Science<br>Art & Humanities |

***Eligibility***

During the third step, the eligibility phase, 53 articles were assessed for potential inclusion in the review. At this stage, the titles, abstracts, and key content of each article were carefully examined to determine their relevance to the inclusion criteria and the objectives of the present study. Following this assessment, 23 articles were excluded since they were outside the scope of the study, had titles that were not sufficiently relevant, contained abstracts that did not align with the research objectives, or lacked accessible full-text empirical evidence. As a result, 30 articles were retained for subsequent review.

***Data Abstraction and Analysis***

An integrative analysis approach was applied in this study as the main assessment strategy to examine and synthesize findings from diverse research designs, with most studies adopting quantitative methods. The main purpose of this approach was to identify relevant themes and subthemes that emerged from the selected literature. The theme development process began after data collection, as illustrated in Figure 2. In this stage, the authors systematically reviewed 30 selected publications by examining statements, patterns, and key content related to the study's central focus. Correspondingly, the authors analyzed current studies on school governance and educational leadership for sustainable school improvement by comparing their methodologies, findings, and contributions. Through collaborative discussion, the authors developed themes grounded in the evidence from the reviewed studies. During the analysis, a research log was maintained to record observations, reflections, challenges, and emerging ideas that informed data interpretation. Finally, the findings were compared to ensure consistency and coherence in the development of themes. Any conceptual differences among the authors were discussed and resolved through consensus.

**Table 3: Number and Details of Primary Studies Database**

| No | Authors | Title | Year | Journal | Scopus | WoS | ERIC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Alexandrova & Krasteva (2026) | Skills Ecosystem and the Role of School Management for | 2026 | Societies | / | | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Sustainable Development of Dual Education | | | | | |
| P2 | Bashir & Alam (2024) | Does distributed leadership fit the paradigm transformation of secondary school effectiveness in Nigeria? | 2024 | International Journal of Management in Education | / | | |
| P3 | Bilbokaitė et al. (2024) | Implementing Inclusive Education: Experiences of School Leaders in Change Management; [Įtraukiojo ugdymo įgyvendinimas: mokyklų vadovų patirtys valdant pokyčius] | 2024 | Specialusis Ugdymas | / | | |
| P4 | Campbell & Sum (2026) | Leadership for learning: A policy analysis of the global education monitoring report 2024 and its local implications for school leadership | 2026 | Management in Education | / | | |
| P5 | Contreras et al. (2024) | Re-contextualization of school quality assessment policies: an ethnography approach to SIMCE on Chilean disadvantaged schools | 2024 | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Accountability | / | | / |
| P6 | Daudi (2025) | The will to collaboration–shaping leaders for schools of the future | 2025 | Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research | / | / | |
| P7 | Davis-Singaravelu et al. (2026) | Boundary-Spanning Beyond Widening Participation: Exploring Collaborative Leadership Practices in an English Schools–University Partnership | 2026 | Education Sciences | / | / | |
| P8 | DeMatthews & Means-Parker (2024) | Inclusive Principal Leadership and Family Engagement: Strengthening Parent Participation in IEP Meetings and Beyond | 2024 | Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas | | | / |
| P9 | Farley-Ripple (2024) | The Use of Research in Schools: Principals' Capacity and Contributions | 2024 | Education Sciences | / | / | |
| P10 | Godfrey et al. (2026) | School Leadership in the Anthropocene: Four Pillars of an Intelligent, Humane Response | 2026 | Educational Forum | / | / | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P11 | Godfrey & Munoz-Chereau (2024) | School improvement and peer learning partnerships: building organizational resilience in primary schools in England | 2024 | Frontiers in Education | | / | |
| P12 | Harder & Schumann (2025) | Digital Transformation of Vocational Schools in Switzerland: The Importance of Innovative School Management Behavior | 2025 | Education Sciences | / | / | |
| P13 | Hovardas et al. (2026) | STE(A)M Learning Ecologies and creativity: A typology of open schooling projects based on stakeholder and learner engagement | 2026 | Thinking Skills and Creativity | / | / | |
| P14 | Howley et al. (2025) | An Instrument for Measuring the Improvement Work of Professional Learning Communities | 2025 | Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies | | | / |
| P15 | Hughes & Davis (2025) | Enhancing primary school leadership through cultural intelligence and talent management: A case study approach | 2025 | Educational Management Administration, and Leadership | / | / | |
| P16 | Johnson et al. (2026) | From compliance to responsiveness: the interplay of cultural and operational factors in developing schools as living systems | 2026 | Frontiers in Education | | / | |
| P17 | Joo & Kim (2024) | Assessing Distributed Leadership Practice in Korea: An Exploratory Study on Scale Development | 2024 | KEDI Journal of Educational Policy | / | / | |
| P18 | Karamanidou (2026) | Leading for a Sustainable Future: Sustainable Leadership in Cyprus Primary Schools | 2026 | Education Sciences | / | / | |
| P19 | Liu et al. (2024) | Challenges and Professional Support for Principals at Rural Schools for Sustainable Development | 2024 | Sustainability (Switzerland) | / | | |
| P20 | López-López et al. (2024) | Educational research and school practice: unraveling a complex relationship from the perspective of management teams; [Investigación y práctica educativa: desentramando una relación | 2024 | Educacion XX1 | / | / | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | compleja desde la mirada de los equipos directivos] | | | | | |
| P21 | Lushaj & Shatri (2026) | Contemporary leadership models and collaboration in primary schools: a mixed-methods study on school quality | 2026 | Frontiers in Education | | / | |
| P22 | Meyer & Richter (2025) | Longitudinal effects of a professional development program on principals' leadership practices: results of a baseline latent change score model | 2025 | Professional Development in Education | / | / | |
| P23 | Munoz-Chereau & Ehren (2024) | Turning Around 'Stuck' Schools In England: Effective Leadership In Extremely Challenging Circumstances | 2024 | Perspectiva Educacional | | / | |
| P24 | O'Rourke & O'Brien (2026) | Implementing distributed leadership in Irish voluntary secondary schools from the principals' perspective | 2026 | Irish Educational Studies | / | / | |
| P25 | O'Doherty et al. (2025) | Does school inspection lead to school improvement? A case study | 2025 | Educational Management Administration & Leadership | | / | |
| P26 | Ogunbayo & Yassim (2025) | Impact of Leadership Styles and School Culture on Educational Institutional Management: A Study of Selected Schools | 2025 | International Journal of Educational Organization and Leadership | / | | |
| P27 | Rojas-Bravo et al. (2024) | School conditions and principal practices promoting instructional data use in high-stakes accountability systems | 2024 | Studies in Educational Evaluation | / | / | |
| P28 | Saltmarsh (2024) | How Communities of Practice Can Mitigate School Leader Burnout | 2024 | Leadership and Policy in Schools | / | / | |
| P29 | Shanko & Kabtyimer (2024) | Examining the status of school improvement program implementation in primary schools: a case study in South Ethiopia region | 2024 | Frontiers in Education | / | / | |
| P30 | Zumpe et al. (2024) | Developing mindsets for equity-focused continuous improvement: tracing shifts in an Ed.D. program using critical improvement science | 2024 | Frontiers in Education | | / | |

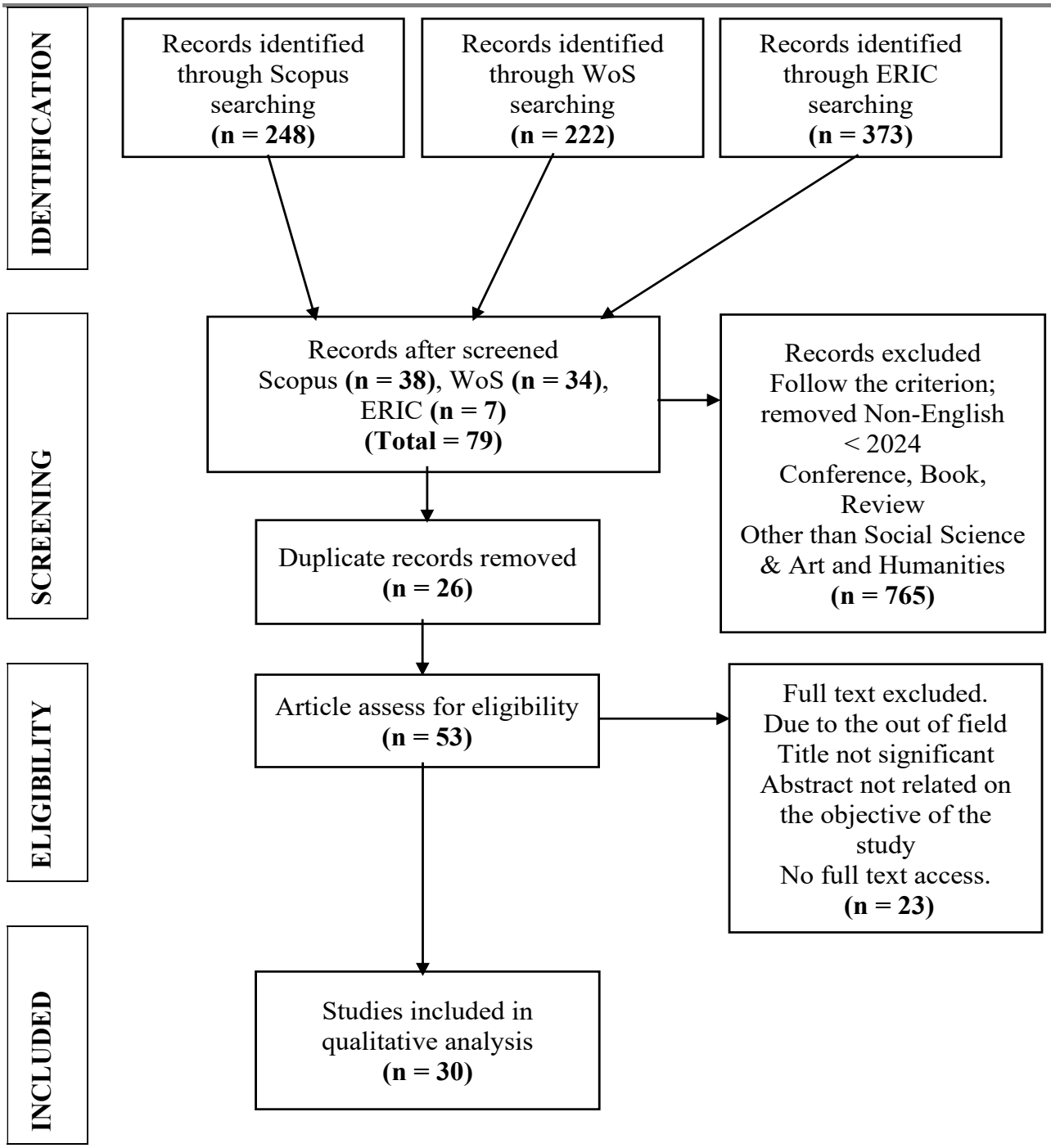


**Figure 1: Flow Diagram of the Proposed Search Study**

## Quality of Appraisal

According to the guidelines proposed by Kitchenham and Charter (2007), once the primary studies have been selected, the next step is to assess the quality of the research and systematically compare the studies. Primary studies are the original research articles, papers, or documents included in the systematic review after the selection process. These studies serve as the main sources of evidence and are analyzed, evaluated for quality, and compared either quantitatively or qualitatively to address the research questions formulated in the review. In this study, the Quality Assessment (QA) criteria adapted from Abouzahra et al. (2020) were applied. The assessment consists of six QA criteria relevant to this SLR. Each criterion was evaluated using three possible ratings: “Yes” (Y), with a score of 1 when the criterion was fully met; “Partly” (P), with a score of 0.5 when the criterion was partially met, though it had some gaps or limitations; and “No” (N), with a score of 0 when the criterion was not met.

• 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 for evaluating a study against 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 examines 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 research's relevance and impact.

III. Is the study methodology clearly established?

This assesses whether the research methodology is well-defined and appropriate for achieving the study's objectives. Methodological clarity 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?

Note that 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, calculated by summing the scores of all the experts, must exceed 3.0. This threshold ensures that only studies meeting a certain quality standard proceed further.

# RESULT AND FINDING

Based on QA, Table 4 summarizes the assessment performance results for the 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 | 4.5 | 75 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P6 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0 | 4.5 | 75 |
| P7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P8 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 4.5 | 75 |
| P9 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P10 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 1 | 0.5 | 0 | 4 | 66.7 |
| P11 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 5.5 | 91.7 |
| P12 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P13 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P14 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 5.5 | 91.7 |
| P15 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P16 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 5.5 | 91.7 |
| P17 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 5.5 | 91.7 |
| P18 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 1 | 5.5 | 91.7 |
| P19 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P20 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P21 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 5.5 | 91.7 |
| P22 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 1 | 5.5 | 91.7 |
| P23 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P24 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P25 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P26 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 1 | 5.5 | 91.7 |
| P27 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P28 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0 | 4.5 | 75 |
| P29 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| P30 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 83.3 |

Based on the QA of the 30 selected articles, most studies demonstrated strong methodological and conceptual quality. A total of 25 articles were categorized as high quality, scoring 80% or higher, while five were categorized as moderate quality, scoring between 60% and 79%. None of the selected articles fell into the low-quality category. Overall, the reviewed studies clearly stated their research purposes, demonstrated the relevance and usefulness of their work, and provided sufficient explanations of their methodological approaches. However, the most common limitation observed was that several abstracts did not explicitly mention the study's limitations or provide a clear comparison with similar prior work. Therefore, while the selected articles were generally suitable

for inclusion in the SLR, further verification through full-text review is recommended. This is particularly true when assessing study limitations and comparing them with prior research.

The produced themes were eventually modified to ensure consistency. The analysis selection was conducted by experts in school governance and educational leadership for sustainable school improvement 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: Collaborative and Inclusive Leadership for School Improvement*

This theme suggests that school improvement is strongly influenced by leadership practices that share responsibility, encourage participation, and involve the wider school community. Bashir and Alam (2024), Joo and Kim (2024), and O'Rourke and O'Brien (2026) discovered that distributed leadership supports school effectiveness through shared decision-making, teacher involvement, collegial culture, and principal leadership. However, distributed leadership cannot be applied in the same way in all schools. Bashir and Alam (2024) emphasized the need to adapt leadership to the Nigerian school context, while O'Rourke and O'Brien (2026) linked its implementation to power, accountability, sustainability, and the time allotted to leadership meetings. Joo and Kim (2024) also revealed that distributed leadership can guide school improvement when it is clearly measured and practiced.

Inclusive leadership is also important as it connects school improvement with equity, family involvement, and support for diverse learners. Bilbokaitė et al. (2024), DeMatthews and Means-Parker (2024), and Ogunbayo and Yassim (2025) stated that inclusive leadership requires cooperation, professional competence, resources, and active participation from teachers, parents, and community members. Bilbokaitė et al. (2024) mentioned that inclusive education is linked to equality, individual needs, educational support, teamwork, and networking. However, it is often constrained by weak cooperation, insufficient staff competence, limited finances, poor infrastructure, and monitoring issues. DeMatthews and Means-Parker (2024) highlighted parent participation in special education decision-making, while Ogunbayo and Yassim (2025) demonstrated that transformational and servant leadership foster positive school culture and effective resource management.

The theme also highlights collaboration beyond the formal school structure. Daudi (2025), Davis-Singaravelu et al. (2026), and Hovardas et al. (2026) asserted that collaboration involves professional learning, institutional partnerships, stakeholder dialogue, and learner engagement. Daudi (2025) posited that Collaborative Professional Learning encourages shared responsibility, collective unity, and teacher commitment to change. Davis-Singaravelu et al. (2026) highlighted that school-university partnerships help stakeholders coordinate action, exchange knowledge, and develop shared understanding for educational improvement. Hovardas et al. (2026) added that open schooling projects can strengthen creativity, participation, and sustainability when teachers are empowered, and dialogue is promoted. Overall, school improvement becomes more sustainable when leadership is shared through networks, partnerships, and collective professional practice.

Taken together, Theme 1 indicates that collaborative and inclusive leadership is not a uniform practice across all school systems. While distributed leadership, family engagement, and stakeholder participation are frequently associated with school improvement, their effectiveness depends on the extent to which school structures genuinely allow shared authority, professional trust, and inclusive decision-making. In contexts where leadership remains hierarchical or where resources are limited, collaborative leadership may become procedural rather than transformative. Thus, the findings suggest that sustainable school improvement requires not only the presence of collaborative structures, but also supportive governance conditions that enable meaningful participation and shared responsibility.

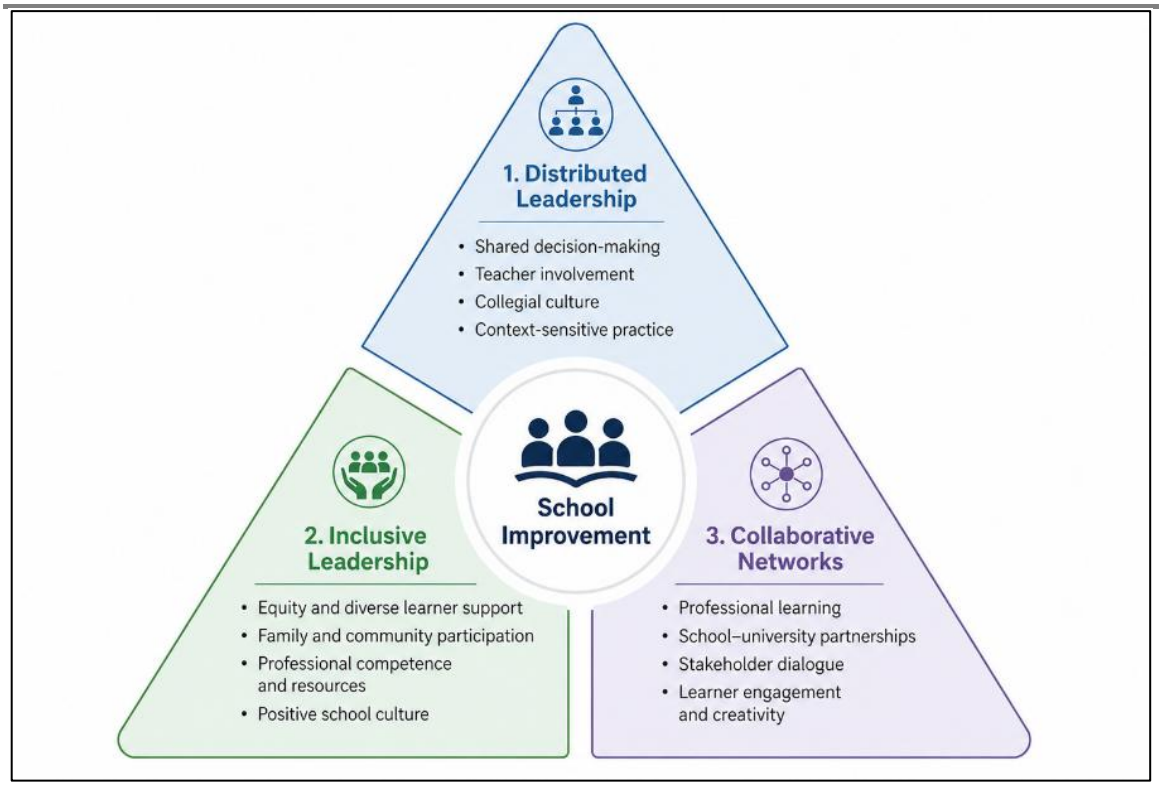


**Figure 2: Collaborative and Inclusive Leadership for School Improvement**

### *Theme 2: Governance, Accountability, and Evidence-Informed School Improvement*

Theme 2 indicates that while governance and accountability are important foundations for school improvement, these mechanisms need to be suitable with local school realities. Campbell and Sum (2026), Contreras et al. (2024), and O'Doherty et al. (2025) asserted that accountability policies, assessment systems, and school inspection can influence leadership practice and school development. Despite this, these systems may create pressure when implemented through standardized expectations without enough attention to context. Contreras et al. (2024) underscored that schools in disadvantaged areas experienced testing as unfair and decontextualized, while Campbell and Sum (2026) stressed the need for context-responsive accountability policies. O'Doherty et al. (2025) noted that inspection can support sustainable school improvement when trust, self-evaluation, and leadership acceptance are present.

Evidence-informed improvement is another key issue in this theme, as school leaders are expected to use research and data in decision-making. Farley-Ripple (2024), López-López et al. (2024), and Rojas-Bravo et al. (2024) suggested that research use and data-driven decision-making can strengthen school improvement when supported by school capacity, leadership behavior, and organizational routines. Farley-Ripple (2024) discovered that principals can support the use of evidence through human capital, culture, resources, and decision-making structures. López-López et al. (2024) also reported that the use of scientific knowledge in school practice remains limited due to organizational culture and the way research is presented. Rojas-Bravo et al. (2024) added that principal practices and school conditions help promote instructional data use beyond simple compliance.

The studies suggest that governance, accountability, and evidence-informed practice must operate together to support sustainable school improvement. Campbell and Sum (2026), Shanko and Kabtyimer (2024), and O'Doherty et al. (2025) asserted that policy, inspection, leadership, management, and monitoring are important for improving school quality. Shanko and Kabtyimer (2024) observed that the implementation of the school improvement program was moderate, with stronger results in teaching and learning and school leadership, though weaker areas still required training, incentives, and formal monitoring tools. Farley-Ripple (2024), López-López et al. (2024), and Rojas-Bravo et al. (2024) further highlighted that evidence and data become useful when leaders have the capacity to interpret, apply, and connect them with school needs.

The findings under Theme 2 reveal an important debate between accountability as improvement support and accountability as compliance pressure. Governance, inspection, and data-informed practices can strengthen school improvement when they are used to support reflection, professional learning, and contextual decision-making. However, when accountability is imposed through rigid standards or external performance pressure, it may reduce school autonomy and weaken teacher support. Therefore, evidence-informed governance should not be understood only as the use of data or policy monitoring, but as the ability of school leaders to interpret evidence critically and align it with local school needs.

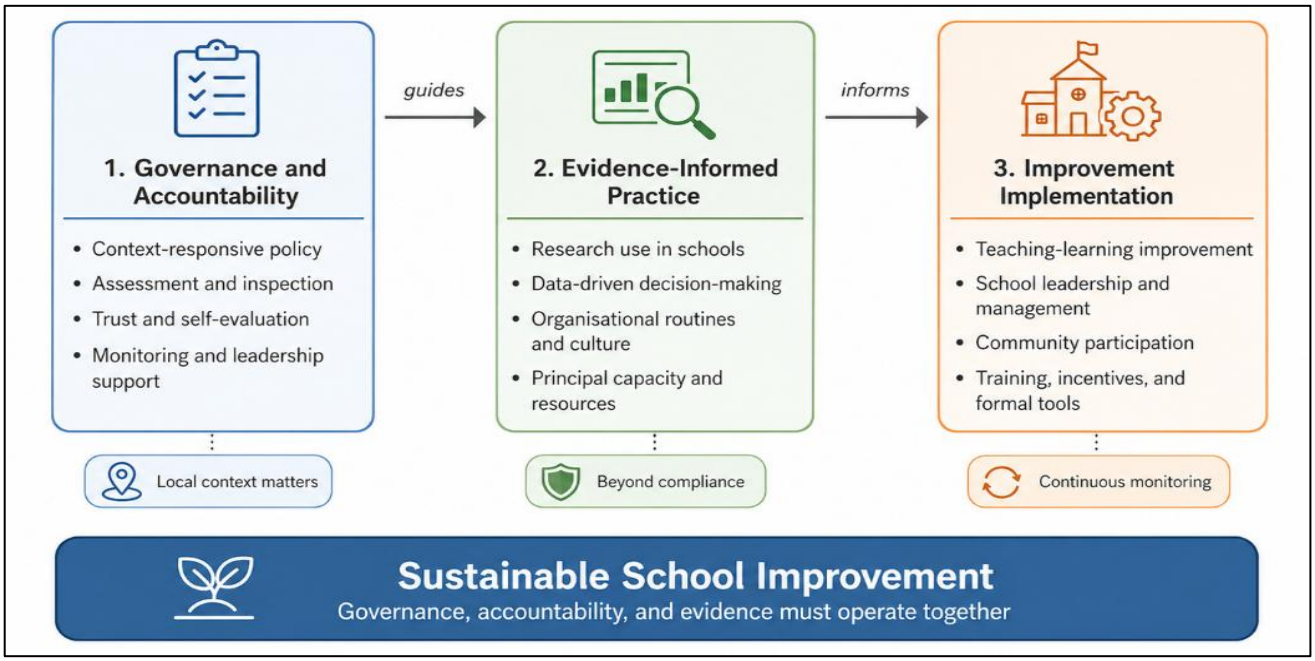


**Figure 3: Governance, Accountability, and Evidence-Informed School Improvement**

***Theme 3: Sustainable School Development, Resilience, and Leadership Capacity***

Theme 3 indicates that sustainable school development depends on leadership capacity to connect school goals with local needs, stakeholder participation, and long-term improvement. Alexandrova and Krasteva (2026), Karamanidou (2026), and Harder and Schumann (2025) highlighted that sustainable development in schools requires adaptive leadership, whole-school planning, and practical support from policy and community structures. Alexandrova and Krasteva (2026) discovered that dual education becomes sustainable when school management works closely with stakeholders and responds to labor-market needs. Karamanidou (2026) similarly observed that sustainable leadership involves the strategic integration of education for sustainable development, teacher empowerment, student participation, and community partnerships. Harder and Schumann (2025) added that digital transformation also requires innovative school management and a holistic school-improvement approach.

Resilience is also an important element, as schools face pressure from accountability, limited resources, staff turnover, inequality, and changing educational demands. Godfrey and Munoz-Chereau (2024), Johnson et al. (2026), and Munoz-Chereau and Ehren (2024) highlighted that resilient schools can anticipate problems, cope with disruptions, and adapt through learning, trust, and shared responsibility. Godfrey and Munoz-Chereau (2024) mentioned that peer learning partnerships supported knowledge building, resource sharing, social capital, and professional accountability in primary schools. Johnson et al. (2026) explained that schools function as living systems where culture, feedback, reflection, and operational structures shape responsiveness. Munoz-Chereau and Ehren (2024) also stated that turnaround schools improved through distributed leadership, moral purpose, external support, trust, and strong internal governance.

Leadership capacity is another central issue for sustaining improvement, as school leaders need continuous learning, professional support, and emotional resilience. Howley et al. (2025), Hughes and

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Davis (2025), Liu et al. (2024), Meyer and Richter (2025), Saltmarsh (2024), and Zumpe et al. (2024) demonstrated that leadership development is strengthened through professional learning communities, talent management, mentoring, coaching, collaboration, and equity-focused continuous improvement. These studies suggest that sustainable improvement cannot depend only on individual effort. It requires systems that support leaders' knowledge, well-being, and capacity to lead change.

Theme 3 shows that sustainability is strongly shaped by school capacity, resilience, and contextual support. Digital transformation, professional learning, and leadership development are important, but they do not operate equally across all schools. Schools in rural, disadvantaged, or resource-limited settings may face greater challenges in sustaining improvement because leadership capacity is affected by infrastructure, policy support, professional development access, and staff stability. Therefore, sustainable school improvement requires both internal leadership strength and external system-level support.

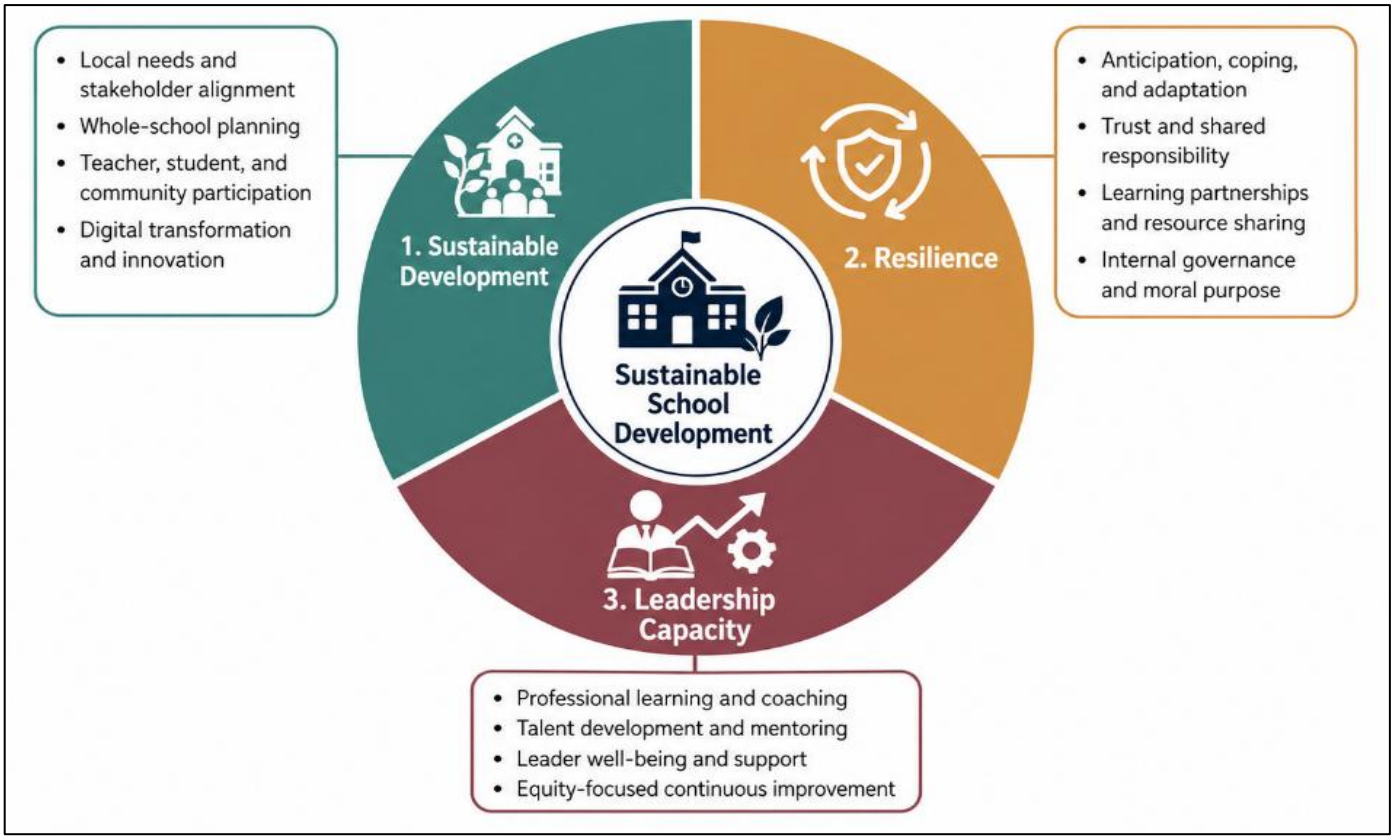


**Figure 4: Sustainable School Development, Resilience, and Leadership Capacity**

**Critical Synthesis of Contrasting Evidence and Contextual Differences**

Although the reviewed studies generally agree that collaborative leadership, governance, accountability, and leadership capacity contribute to sustainable school improvement, the evidence also reveals several tensions. Distributed and collaborative leadership are commonly presented as positive mechanisms for school improvement; however, their effectiveness depends strongly on school culture, leadership authority, time allocation, and policy expectations. In some contexts, distributed leadership supports teacher participation and shared responsibility, while in others it may remain symbolic if decision-making power is still concentrated at the principal or policy level. This suggests that collaboration should not be understood merely as the delegation of tasks but as a deeper redistribution of professional trust, authority, and accountability.

Accountability and evidence-informed practices appear to have mixed effects across educational contexts. In well-supported school systems, accountability mechanisms such as inspection, data use, and research-informed decision-making may strengthen school improvement by guiding reflection, monitoring progress, and improving instructional quality. However, in disadvantaged or high-pressure contexts,

accountability may become compliance-driven and disconnected from local school realities. This shows that governance mechanisms are not automatically beneficial; their impact depends on whether they are implemented as supportive tools for learning or as external control mechanisms.

The reviewed studies indicate that sustainable school improvement differs across geographical and socioeconomic settings. Studies from developed or resource-supported systems tend to emphasize professional learning, evidence use, digital transformation, and leadership innovation. In contrast, studies involving rural, disadvantaged, or developing contexts often highlight issues of limited resources, infrastructure constraints, weak professional support, and contextual inequality. Therefore, sustainable school improvement requires both transferable principles, such as inclusive leadership and stakeholder participation, and context-specific strategies that respond to local needs, resources, and policy environments.

# DISCUSSION

The review reveals that sustainable school improvement depends on the interaction between leadership, governance, accountability, collaboration, and school capacity. School improvement is influenced by the principal's personal ability and how leadership responsibilities are shared among teachers, management teams, parents, community members, and other stakeholders. Accordingly, collaborative and inclusive leadership helps create a school culture that supports participation, trust, shared decision-making, and responsiveness to different learner needs. When leadership is distributed in a meaningful way, schools are better able to strengthen teamwork, improve professional relationships, and build a stronger sense of collective responsibility.

The findings also demonstrate that governance and accountability are important for improving school quality, though these mechanisms need to be implemented with sensitivity to local context. Policies, inspections, assessment systems, research use, and data-informed decision-making can support improvement when school leaders have the capacity to interpret and apply them properly. However, accountability becomes less effective when it is overly standardized, overly focused on compliance, or disconnected from the real conditions schools face. Therefore, effective governance should balance monitoring with support, evidence with professional judgment, and policy expectations with school-level realities.

Sustainable school development also requires resilience and continuous leadership capacity building. Schools face various challenges, including limited resources, staff turnover, changing policy demands, digital transformation, rural disadvantage, inequality, and increasing pressure to achieve better outcomes. These challenges require leaders who can adapt, mobilize resources, build professional learning cultures, and sustain motivation among school members. Professional development, peer learning, communities of practice, coaching, stakeholder partnership, and internal talent development are important supports for long-term improvement. In this sense, school improvement should be understood as a continuous process rather than a one-time reform.

### Limitations and Future Research

This review has several limitations. The publication window was limited to 2024–2026. Although this timeframe enabled the review to focus on recent and emerging developments in school governance and educational leadership, it may have excluded earlier influential studies that remain relevant to sustainable school improvement. Although the review included studies from different educational contexts, the synthesis did not fully examine regional, socioeconomic, and policy-level differences in depth. The review focused mainly on thematic patterns and may not fully capture contradictory evidence across governance and leadership models. Future reviews should consider a broader publication period, include more studies from developing and underrepresented regions, and conduct comparative analyses of governance models across different policy environments. Such future research would help identify which governance and leadership practices are transferable across systems and which require local adaptation.

# CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the reviewed literature suggests that sustainable school improvement is strongest when collaborative leadership, inclusive participation, accountable governance, evidence-informed practice, organizational resilience, and leadership development operate together. A school becomes more capable of improvement when decision-making is shared, stakeholders are involved, data and research are used wisely, and leadership capacity is continuously strengthened. Hence, sustainable improvement requires strong leaders, supportive systems, clear governance structures, professional trust, and a school culture that is ready to learn, adapt, and improve over time.

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**Conflicts of Interest**

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

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