Reframing School Stakeholder Engagement through the Lens of Critical Theory: A Systematic Review of Governance and Leadership Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines how Critical Theory reframes school stakeholder engagement within educational governance and leadership. It responds to the continuing dominance of hierarchical and bureaucratic decision-making that limits authentic participation despite decades of decentralization reforms. By integrating evidence from twenty-eight (28) studies published between 2017 and 2025, the review synthesizes international and Philippine research through the analytical lens of Critical Theory, emphasizing power relations, communicative action, and emancipation. Guided by PRISMA methodology and thematic synthesis, the review identifies persistent tensions between policy rhetoric and democratic practice. Studies from contexts such as Iran, South Korea, China, Brazil, and the Philippines reveal that participatory mechanisms often remain procedural rather than transformative, constrained by cultural deference and structural control. Findings demonstrate that genuine stakeholder engagement emerges when governance emphasizes reflective dialogue, shared agency, and distributed leadership supported by institutional trust. The review contributes to theory by positioning engagement as an emancipatory process grounded in communication and equity, extending the works of Habermas and Freire into practical governance models. It further recommends that educational leaders institutionalize spaces for critical reflection and participatory decision-making, while policymakers strengthen decentralization with equitable capacity-building and transparency mechanisms. The study concludes that stakeholder engagement in education must evolve from compliance toward communicative collaboration to realize democratic governance and social justice.

Keywords: Critical Theory, Stakeholder Engagement, School Governance, Participatory Leadership, Emancipatory Education

INTRODUCTION

Education governance increasingly requires the active participation of diverse stakeholders including teachers, parents, learners, and communities. Yet, despite global calls for participatory reform, school governance continues to operate under hierarchical and bureaucratic systems that restrict genuine inclusion and shared decision-making. The concept of stakeholder engagement, once heralded as a democratizing force, has often been reduced to procedural consultation and limited representation (Valizadeh, 2023; Laguda et al., 2023). This study seeks to reexamine how engagement is conceptualized and practiced in education by synthesizing recent literature through Critical Theory. By interrogating power relations, communicative practices, and participatory structures, this review explores how governance and leadership can move from hierarchical compliance toward emancipatory collaboration.

stakeholder engagement within the context of governance and leadership. While numerous studies discuss participatory education reforms, the literature remains fragmented across regions and theoretical orientations. For example, international scholarship has focused heavily on decentralization policies but seldom explored how

such reforms translate into authentic empowerment at the school level (Jeong, Lee, & Cho, 2017; Wang, 2024; Haile, 2024). In the Philippine context, research has documented similar inconsistencies between policy intent and practice, with decentralization improving consultation but not redistributing decision-making power (Guzman, 2022; King, 2024; Laguda et al., 2023). However, despite growing academic attention to stakeholder engagement, there is still limited synthesis that connects governance theory, leadership practice, and critical social analysis. A systematic review guided by PRISMA standards and framed by Critical Theory helps consolidate these perspectives, offering both a conceptual clarification and an empirical mapping of the field.

Numerous knowledge gaps persist in the literature. Studies reveal that participatory mechanisms often exist in form but not in substance. In South Korea and Brazil, hierarchical control continues to constrain teacher and community participation even under decentralized governance (Jeong, Lee, & Cho, 2017; Soares Furtado Oliveira et al., 2023). In China, bureaucratic structures and cultural hierarchies maintain limited space for dialogue and reflection (Guo, Li, & Zhang, 2025; Wang, 2024). In the Philippines, similar tendencies appear, where participation remains procedural rather than transformative (Bartolome, 2019; Laguda et al., 2023). Leadership, although often described as collaborative or participatory, is rarely examined through the deeper lens of critical reflection and emancipation. Existing studies have yet to fully explore how critical consciousness, communicative action, and dialogic engagement can reshape governance practices toward social justice and agency (Haile, 2024; Valizadeh, 2023).

Furthermore, the literature also reveals structural and ideological barriers that sustain inequities in educational governance. Mahajan (2023) and Bond (2024) found that governance reforms driven by efficiency and accountability often reproduce social hierarchies, limiting representation of marginalized groups. In the Philippine context, Guzman (2022) and Saguin (2020) noted that bureaucratic inertia and uneven local capacity prevent decentralization policies from achieving inclusive participation. These patterns align with Habermas's (1981) critique of instrumental rationality, where technocratic systems suppress communicative dialogue, and Freire's (1970) view that education becomes oppressive when it denies learners and communities the power to act as co-creators of knowledge. The persistence of these structures highlights an unresolved tension between reform rhetoric and lived educational realities.

The relationship between governance, leadership, and stakeholder engagement continues to be an important area of inquiry. International studies indicate that distributed leadership and dialogic governance enhance stakeholder trust and accountability when supported by institutional capacity (Sattar, 2022; Dlamini, 2022; Haile, 2024). Local research complements these findings by showing that participatory leadership strengthens parental and community empowerment, though often constrained by central policy control (Bartolome, 2017; Jabar, 2020; King, 2024). However, both global and Philippine contexts demonstrate that leadership reform without cultural transformation tends to reproduce hierarchy rather than dismantle it. This suggests that the critical interrogation of governance, rather than administrative redesign alone, is necessary to achieve genuine participation.

Within these recurring challenges, the present review identifies a gap in systematically integrating Critical Theory into the analysis of school stakeholder engagement. Although Freirean pedagogy (1970) and Habermasian communicative action (1981) have informed select studies, few have applied these frameworks comprehensively across governance and leadership research. This absence limits understanding of how emancipatory practices can be institutionalized in schools. Moreover, most studies remain context-specific, lacking comparative and theoretical synthesis that could clarify universal and context-bound dynamics of participation. By consolidating evidence from 2017 to 2025, this review seeks to advance a critical synthesis that connects power, communication, and participation in educational governance.

Specifically, this systematic review aims to:

1. Synthesize international and Philippine studies on stakeholder engagement in school governance and leadership through the lens of Critical Theory;

2. Identify recurring themes, models, and barriers related to power relations, participation, and emancipation in educational governance;

3. Examine how critical theoretical principles such as dialogue, reflection, and agency can inform democratic and participatory leadership practices; and

4. Highlight research gaps and methodological patterns that can guide future studies on emancipatory governance and stakeholder empowerment.

Conceptual And Theoretical Foundation

Conceptual Foundation of Critical Theory

Critical Theory, led by scholars like Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas, teaches that schools are never neutral. They either keep old unfair systems in place or help make change for the better (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947; Habermas, 1981; Mahajan, 2023). In practice, this means school rules and leadership must challenge existing barriers that often keep marginalized voices silent. For real school improvement, participation must not be a mere formality, but a process that ensures all groups, especially those less heard, have an equal voice in decisions (Peng, 2024; Haile, 2024; Gillen, 2024).

Critical Theory, together with related ideas like Participatory Democracy and Collaborative Governance, criticizes models that focus too much on efficiency and not enough on fairness and inclusion (Neddersen, 2025). It argues that real participation means more than just dividing tasks. Hence, it requires sharing genuine power and making open, honest dialogue the basis of school decisions (Habermas, 1981, as cited in Mahajan, 2023). Leadership is meaningful when it helps everyone speak, decide, and work together to transform schools into more inclusive communities.

Critical Theory and Stakeholder Engagement

Critical Theory says that getting everyone involved in decision-making at school is both a social and political issue. School leaders need to look at who is included or excluded when making decisions and make sure no group is left out. Research shows that people from low-income backgrounds and certain communities often face hidden barriers that keep them from having a real say, which results in unfairness and weak involvement (Al-Thani, 2025; Ambroso et al., 2021; Bond, 2024).

To fix this, Critical Theory suggests that schools need open conversations, shared responsibilities, and leadership that welcomes input from everyone (Haile, 2024; Peng, 2024). Real engagement happens when there is trust, fairness, and clear, honest communication between families, teachers, and school boards (Sattar, 2022; Clarke, 2020). But many families still feel left out because of communication problems, unclear rules, or traditions that make them feel their voices do not matter (Ambroso et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2025; Woodforde et al., 2024; Bartolome, 2017; Guzman, 2022). In this view, real participation is not just about following school procedures. Instead, it means creating a school community where everyone is truly encouraged and empowered to take part.

Applications in Educational Governance and Leadership

A growing body of literature has demonstrated that the application of Critical Theory to governance and leadership in educational institutions leads to significant improvements in stakeholder engagement, transparency, and institutional responsiveness. In the Philippine context, studies have highlighted that initiatives anchored in critical theory promote decentralized governance and participatory decision-making, resulting in improved educational outcomes and enhanced trust among stakeholders. For example, Laguda et al. (2023) found that the decentralization of school management in the Philippines, by fostering local-level decision-making and shared governance, led to greater teacher and parent involvement, which in turn improved responsiveness to learners' needs. King (2024) provided evidence that participatory governance mechanisms, such as School-Based Management Councils, increase a sense of ownership and agency among teachers, parents, and community members, enhancing overall school performance. Similarly, research by Bartolome (2019) documented how critical pedagogy and collaborative leadership approaches in public schools empowered marginalized families and enabled curricular adaptations tailored to local contexts. Jabar (2020)

described how community partnerships and inclusive school governance practices rooted in critical theory addressed inequities and allowed for more equitable resource allocation. Furthermore, Saguin (2020) reported that local educational boards increased transparency and accountability in school governance, reducing the culture of compliance and boosting stakeholder motivation.

International studies further corroborate these findings. Valizadeh (2023) analyzed how the application of critical theory in educational policy cycles, including reflective dialogue and shared leadership in Iran, fostered democratic participation and reduced hierarchical barriers, significantly improving school climate. Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023) discussed literature across Brazil and highlighted how participatory governance reforms decreased bureaucratic inertia and enhanced educational equity in decentralized school systems. Jeong, Lee, and Cho (2017) examined educational decentralization in South Korea and found that participatory decision-making processes inspired by critical theory allowed for locally relevant solutions and increased satisfaction among all stakeholders. Elacqua et al. (2021) and Melo-Becerra et al. (2020) studied the Colombian experience, where municipalities that practiced participatory governance and community engagement saw significant improvements in student outcomes and reduced administrative barriers. Lastly, Wang (2024) documented China's gradual adoption of critical theory-informed educational reforms, showing that decentralization processes anchored by shared agency and transparency led to improvements in program implementation and stakeholder collaboration.

The relationship articulated across these studies reveals that applying critical theory to governance and leadership in educational systems creates equitable structures and responsive leadership. In the Philippine context, Laguda et al. (2023) illustrated that collaborative, community-centered governance delivered more effective services and directly addressed bureaucratic limitations inherited from decades of centralization. King (2024) asserted that moving toward participatory governance increased stakeholder agency and accountability, translating into measurable learning gains for students and improved morale among teachers and staff. Bartolome (2019) and Jabar (2020) offered concrete evidence that critical theory-inspired interventions, such as open consultations, resource devolution, and leadership development for local stakeholders, resulted in more inclusive and culturally responsive curricula. Internationally, Valizadeh (2023) and Jeong, Lee, and Cho (2017) established that democratized, decentralized leadership structures replaced rigid authority with transparent, dialogic processes, benefiting both institutional performance and individual empowerment. Studies from Colombia and Brazil affirmed that schools practicing critical theory-based governance reduced educational disparities and enhanced both accountability and innovation. Collectively, these works provide compelling evidence for adopting critical theory perspectives in education governance and leadership.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This review adopted a systematic review design guided by PRISMA 2020 standards. Both empirical and theoretical studies published between 2010 and 2025 were considered. The focus was to analyze how Critical Theory is applied to educational governance, participatory leadership, and power relations in school systems in global and Philippine contexts. Philippine regional education databases were added to include context-specific studies (Moher et al., 2010).

Search Strategy

A structured search was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, supplemented by Philippine regional education repositories. The following keywords and Boolean combinations were used:

- "school stakeholder engagement" *or* "community participation in schools"

- "critical theory in education" *and* "school leadership"

- "participatory leadership" *or* "democratic school governance"

- "decentralized school management" *and* "power relations"

Search limits were set to peer-reviewed journals, policy studies, and full-text English publications. Duplicate records were identified and removed prior to screening. Philippine regional education databases were added to include context-specific studies (Moher et al., 2010).

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion criteria required studies to (1) investigate school stakeholder engagement within governance or leadership contexts, (2) apply or critique critical theory, (3) address themes of power relations or emancipation, (4) appear in peer-reviewed journals or policy reports and (5) Accessible in full text and written in English. Moreover, Studies are excluded if they: (1) focused solely on classroom-level participation, (2) lacking substantive governance analysis were excluded, or (3) were opinion essays without empirical or conceptual rigor (Mahajan, 2023; Laguda et al., 2023).

Screening Process

The selection process followed four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. Title and abstract screening were conducted to determine relevance. Full-text review validated theoretical alignment and methodological suitability. A total of 28 studies met the inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis (Page et al., 2021).
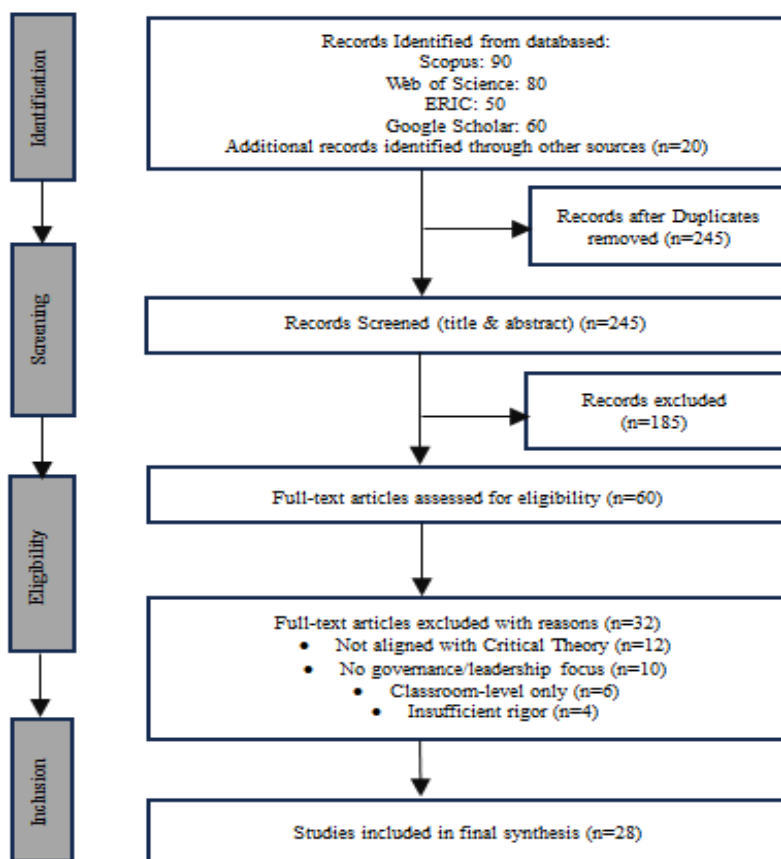

Fig 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

Data Extraction and Synthesis Framework

Data extraction employed a structured coding guide capturing study context, theoretical framing, stakeholder processes, and outcomes. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic synthesis approach: involving initial coding, theme development, and synthesis across studies. Reflexive memoing and regular calibration checks ensured consistency and minimized interpretive bias (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Moreover, each reviewed study was summarized using a structured table that ensured transparency and consistency in analysis. The tables (Tables 1–8) include five core elements: (1) Author (Year), identifying the researcher and publication year; (2) Country / Education Level, indicating geographic and institutional context; (3) Method or Design, describing whether the study was empirical, theoretical, or policy-based; Theoretical Lens, outlining the guiding framework such as Critical Theory, Freirean Pedagogy, or Communicative Action; and (4) Key Insight, summarizing the main contribution or finding relevant to stakeholder engagement and governance. These elements collectively capture context, method, theory, and outcome, aligning with PRISMA 2020 standards for systematic data extraction and providing the foundation for the thematic synthesis presented in the Results section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Power Relations and Hierarchical Governance

Table 1. Foreign Studies on Power Relations and Hierarchical Governance in Education Through the Lens of Critical Theory

Author & Year	Country / Education Level	Method / Theoretical Lens	Governance Focus	Key Insight
Clarke (2020)	Multi-region (Asia & West) – School Boards	Multi-case Study / Critical Discourse Analysis	Communication and trust in governance	Communication gaps reflecting structural hierarchies undermined democratic participation.
Dlamini (2022)	South Africa – Public Schools	Qualitative Case Study / Critical Leadership Theory	Shared governance and distributed authority	Colonial-era administrative hierarchies continue to influence power structures in school management.
Elacqua et al. (2021)	Colombia – Local School Systems	Mixed Methods / Collaborative Governance Framework	Municipal-level education reform	Identifies governance decentralization improves outcomes but retained central oversight culture.
Guo, Li, & Zhang (2025)	China – Urban Public Schools	Qualitative Study / Poststructural Critical Analysis	Power and exclusion in stakeholder participation	Bureaucratic hierarchies perpetuate exclusion and inequality in urban educational settings.
Gillen (2024)	United Kingdom – Secondary Schools	Theoretical Analysis / Transparency & Communicative Governance	Leadership communication	Transparency policies alone do not dismantle existing hierarchies without critical dialogue.
Haile (2024)	Ethiopia – Public School System	Qualitative Field Study / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Stakeholder engagement and dialogue	Found top-down participation structures limits genuine democratic dialogue among school actors.
Jeong, Lee, & Cho (2017)	South Korea – Public Secondary Education	Comparative Multi-case Study / Participatory Democratic Leadership	Educational decentralization	Found partial power redistribution; hierarchical norms persisted despite structural reforms.

Melo-Becerra et al. (2020)	Colombia – Public Schools	Quantitative Policy Analysis / Critical Institutionalism	Educational policy cycles	Hierarchical management persists under decentralized systems, affecting stakeholder equity.
Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023)	Brazil – Public Basic Education	Policy Review / Critical Policy Analysis	Decentralized governance reforms	Bureaucratic inertia constrained shared governance despite participatory laws.
Valizadeh (2023)	Iran – National Education Policy	Qualitative Case Analysis / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Policy and school-level decentralization	Hierarchical policy control limits participatory leadership; dialogic reforms improve democratic engagement.
Wang (2024)	China – Basic Education	Policy Analysis / Transformtive Leadership Framework	Decentralization policy reforms	State-centered reforms retain hierarchical decision patterns despite democratization aims.

The synthesis of ten foreign studies in Table 1 shows that hierarchical governance structures continue to influence educational systems even in contexts where decentralization and participatory reforms have been introduced. Across various countries such as Iran, South Korea, Brazil, Colombia, China, and South Africa, the reviewed works reveal that democratization efforts in school governance often interact with long-standing bureaucratic traditions and cultural hierarchies.

Valizadeh (2023) and Haile (2024) describe how centralized policy control and limited stakeholder dialogue constrain the transformative intent of decentralization. In Iran and Ethiopia, participatory decision-making processes are shaped by administrative practices that emphasize efficiency and compliance over deliberation and collaboration. Jeong, Lee, and Cho (2017) note that decentralization in South Korea led to only partial redistribution of authority, as hierarchical structures remained embedded within school management systems. These observations reflect Habermas's (1981) concept of bureaucratic rationality, which prioritizes control over communicative engagement.

The Latin American studies of Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023), Elacqua et al. (2021), and Melo-Becerra et al. (2020) describe similar experiences. While reforms in Brazil and Colombia improved administrative responsiveness and community participation, decision-making continued to operate within centralized frameworks. The persistence of such patterns highlights the intersection of structural and ideological factors that influence educational governance.

In the cases of China and the United Kingdom, Guo, Li, and Zhang (2025) and Gillen (2024) identify how asymmetries of power manifest through managerial communication and limited transparency. Procedural reforms intended to encourage inclusion often reproduce institutional boundaries that restrict open dialogue. Wang (2024) observes that although policies in China advocate democratization, decision-making remains closely guided by state authority.

From a postcolonial perspective, Dlamini (2022) reports that administrative systems in South Africa continue to bear the imprint of colonial governance models, influencing leadership practices and sustaining uneven power relations between administrators and local communities. These diverse national contexts illustrate the complex interaction between structural design, historical legacies, and leadership culture in shaping how authority and participation coexist in educational systems.

The persistence of hierarchical control across these contexts underscores the need for governance models rooted in critical dialogue and shared authority, as discussed in the following section on participatory leadership.

Table 2. Philippine Studies On Power Relations and Hierarchical Governance in Education Through the Lens of Critical Theory

Author & Year	Country / Education Level	Method / Theoretical Lens	Governance Focus	Key Insight
Bartolome (2017)	Philippines – Public Elementary Schools	Literature Review / Critical Pedagogy	Parental involvement and school hierarchy	Highlighted that cultural deference to authority reduces active parental participation in school decision-making.
	Philippines – Parental Engagement	Review / Critical Theory	Power relations in family-school interface	Socio-cultural norms and administrative rigidity perpetuate passive engagement.
Bartolome (2019)	Philippines – Public Basic Education	Case Study / Freirean Critical Pedagogy	Family empowerment and governance	The power imbalance persists between educators and parents; empowerment programs do mitigate but do not erase hierarchy.
Guzman (2022)	Philippines – Basic Education	Case Study / Critical Leadership Theory	Administrative resistance to reform	Persistent top-down governance sustains control and weakens participatory culture.
		Qualitative Field Study / Critical Bureaucracy Theory	Bureaucratic inertia and local governance	Bureaucratic layers reinforce passive compliance and limit local initiative.
Jabar (2020)	Philippines – Community Schools	Qualitative Study / Collaborative Governance Framework	Community partnerships and policy control	Partnerships increased representation but remain constrained by top-down administrative oversight.
King (2024)	Philippines – National Education Policy	Policy Analysis / Participatory Governance Theory	School-Based Management Councils	Participation remains procedural, with central authority dominating final decisions.
Laguda et al. (2023)	Philippines – Basic Education	Policy Evaluation / Qualitative Case / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Decentralization and shared governance	Decentralization improved participation in form but not in substance; decision power remains concentrated at higher levels.
Saguin (2020)	Philippines – Local Educational Boards	Quantitative Analysis / Critical Policy Analysis	Accountability and power-sharing	While boards improved transparency, authority remains centralized with limited citizen oversight.

Philippine research presented in Table 2 demonstrates similar challenges within the national education system. Studies by Laguda et al. (2023) and King (2024) show that decentralization increased participation in form but not in actual decision-making power, with final authority concentrated at higher levels. Guzman (2022) identifies bureaucratic inertia as a factor that limits local autonomy and reinforces top-down control. Bartolome (2017, 2019) explains how socio-cultural norms, such as deference to authority, discourage open participation by

parents and teachers. Jabar (2020) and Saguin (2020) find that mechanisms like community partnerships and local educational boards improved representation and transparency but remained constrained by central oversight. These studies emphasize the interaction between institutional bureaucracy and cultural expectations in maintaining hierarchical decision-making patterns.

Overall, when taken together, the findings from both international and Philippine contexts suggest that hierarchical governance in education persists through both structural and cultural mechanisms. Administrative centralization, limited stakeholder dialogue, and socio-cultural deference continue to hinder the development of genuinely participatory and democratic school leadership. Although decentralization policies have created opportunities for consultation and local engagement, the balance of power remains uneven. Across settings, reforms informed by Critical Theory highlight the need for deeper reflection on how authority, communication, and shared governance can be redefined to achieve authentic participation and educational equity.

Democratic and Participatory Leadership

Table 3. Foreign Studies on Democratic and Participatory Leadership and Voice in Education Through The Lens Of Critical Theory

Author & Year	Country / Education Level	Method / Theoretical Lens	Governance Focus	Key Insight
Al-Thani (2025)	Qatar – Private Education System	Qualitative Analysis / Feminist Critical Theory	Structural exclusion and democratic engagement	Inclusive leadership mitigates exclusion and builds participation through gender-sensitive dialogue.
Dlamini (2022)	South Africa – Basic Education	Case Study / Critical Leadership Theory	Shared governance and distributed leadership	Collaborative leadership can balance administrative control with teacher and community voice.
Gillen (2024)	United Kingdom – Secondary Education	Conceptual Paper / Communicative Governance Model	Transparency and collaborative dialogue	Transparency and communication must coexist with equity-based dialogue to achieve democratic legitimacy.
Haile (2024)	Ethiopia – Public Basic Education	Qualitative Case Study / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Participatory school leadership and communication	Dialogic communication enhances stakeholder trust and democratic participation when power is balanced.
Jeong, Lee, & Cho (2017)	South Korea – Public Secondary	Multi-case Study / Participatory Democracy Theory	Shared governance and decentralization	Participatory decision-making enhances satisfaction and empowerment but needs institutional support.
Sattar (2022)	Pakistan – Public Schools	Mixed Methods / Collaborative Leadership Theory	Shared goals and governance trust	Shared goals and mutual dialogue foster strong trust and accountability among stakeholders.
Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023)	Brazil – Public Basic Education	Qualitative Policy Review / Critical Policy Analysis	Participatory governance reforms	Participatory reforms strengthen school accountability and stakeholder representation.
Valizadeh (2023)	Iran – National	Case Study / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Reflective dialogue in leadership	Reflective dialogue fosters trust and collective agency, shifting

	Education Reform			leadership toward shared governance.
Wang (2024)	China – Basic Education	Policy Review / Transformative Leadership Framework	Shared agency and decentralization	Distributed authority and collective responsibility improve responsiveness and inclusion.

The synthesis analysis of international studies in Table 3 shows that democratic and participatory leadership develops when communication, trust, and collective responsibility are integrated into governance. Across contexts such as Ethiopia, Iran, South Korea, China, South Africa, Pakistan, Brazil, Qatar, and the United Kingdom, leadership practices grounded in dialogue and shared agency improve collaboration and institutional responsiveness. Haile (2024) and Valizadeh (2023) report that dialogic communication and reflective leadership foster stakeholder trust and encourage collective decision-making. Their findings highlight that power balance and continuous reflection are essential to sustain participation. Gillen (2024) adds that transparency alone does not ensure democratic legitimacy unless it is accompanied by equity-based dialogue and mutual understanding among school actors.

Studies from East and Southeast Asia provide evidence that participatory governance can enhance satisfaction and empowerment when institutional support is present. Jeong, Lee, and Cho (2017) observed that participatory decision-making in South Korea increased teacher and parent satisfaction, but required policy reinforcement to prevent tokenism. Wang (2024) found that distributed leadership in China improved inclusion and responsiveness by assigning decision-making responsibilities across multiple stakeholders. Dlamini (2022) described how collaborative governance in South Africa balanced administrative control with community voice, creating more transparent leadership relationships.

Other studies emphasize how shared goals and inclusive dialogue strengthen accountability and trust. Sattar (2022) observed that when teachers and administrators pursue common objectives through open discussion, trust and mutual accountability increase. Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023) found that participatory reforms in Brazil improved school accountability and representation, while Al-Thani (2025) identified that gender-sensitive leadership practices in Qatar enhanced democratic engagement and reduced exclusion.

These international studies show that participatory leadership grounded in dialogue and trust promotes more equitable governance and sustainable collaboration. Leadership that values shared agency and reflection helps institutions move from compliance toward collective ownership of decision-making.

Table 4. Philippine Studies on Democratic and Participatory Leadership and Voice In Education Through The Lens of Critical Theory

Author & Year	Country / Education Level	Method / Theoretical Lens	Governance Focus	Key Insight
Bartolome (2017)	Philippines – Parental Involvement	Literature Review / Critical Pedagogy	Family-school collaboration	Participatory dialogue encourages more inclusive and empathetic leadership practices.
Bartolome (2019)	Philippines – Public Basic Education	Qualitative Study / Freirean Critical Pedagogy	Collaborative family-school leadership	Democratic dialogue between teachers and families increases empowerment and shared purpose.
Jabar (2020)	Philippines – Community Schools	Field Case Study / Critical Theory (Freire)	Community partnerships and participatory leadership	Community involvement enhances shared accountability and local empowerment.

King (2024)	Philippines – National Education	Policy Review / Participatory Governance Framework	School-based management and stakeholder councils	Participatory mechanisms promote inclusivity when decision authority is equitably distributed.
Laguda et al. (2023)	Philippines – Basic Education	Policy Analysis / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Shared governance in decentralized systems	Genuine participation arises from open communication and reflective dialogue, not policy compliance.
Saguin (2020)	Philippines – Local Educational Boards	Quantitative Policy Analysis / Collaborative Leadership Model	Accountability and participatory governance	Shared leadership improves trust and transparency but requires sustained institutional support.

The analysis of Philippine studies in Table 4 shows that democratic and participatory leadership in education develops through open communication, shared responsibility, and equitable authority. Across the reviewed works, participation becomes meaningful when leaders move beyond policy compliance toward reflective and dialogic engagement. Laguda et al. (2023) observed that shared governance is strengthened when school leaders create spaces for communication that encourage mutual reflection and understanding among stakeholders. King (2024) found that participatory structures such as school-based management councils promote inclusivity only when decision-making power is fairly distributed and not merely symbolic.

Moreover, Bartolome (2019) and Jabar (2020) provide evidence that collaboration between teachers, families, and communities builds empowerment and shared accountability. Bartolome (2019) described how democratic dialogue between educators and parents allows families to become active contributors to school improvement. Jabar (2020) reported that community partnerships fostered ownership of local school initiatives and improved coordination between school and community actors. These studies highlight that participatory leadership depends on continuous dialogue and collective commitment rather than isolated consultations.

Saguin (2020) and Bartolome (2017) emphasize the institutional and cultural dimensions that shape participatory governance. Saguin (2020) found that shared leadership strengthens trust and transparency, but sustaining these gains requires institutional mechanisms that support collaboration. Bartolome (2017) pointed out that participatory dialogue in family-school relations nurtures empathy and inclusiveness in leadership practices.

Taken together, the Philippine studies show that participatory leadership thrives when school governance emphasizes dialogue, trust, and power-sharing. Effective collaboration emerges not from policy mandates but from sustained communication and mutual respect among school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members.

Stakeholder Agency, Empowerment, and Emancipation in Educational Governance

Table 5. Foreign studies on stakeholder agency, empowerment, and emancipation in educational governance through the lens of critical theory

Author & Year	Country / Education Level	Method / Theoretical Lens	Governance Focus	Key Insight
Al-Thani (2025)	Qatar – Private Education	Qualitative Case Study / Feminist Critical Theory	Inclusion and gendered empowerment	Critical feminist leadership frameworks enable agency among marginalized women educators and parents.
Dlamini (2022)	South Africa – Public Basic Education	Qualitative Case Study / Critical Leadership Theory	Teacher and community empowerment	Distributed leadership enhances agency among teachers and parents.

Freire (1970)	Brazil – General Education	Theoretical Framework / Freirean Critical Pedagogy	Emancipatory learning and participation	Education becomes liberation when learners are empowered as co-creators of knowledge and agents of change.
Giroux (2011)	United States – Higher and Secondary Education	Theoretical Critique / Critical Pedagogy	Power, resistance, and student agency	Neoliberal control in education limits critical agency and the capacity for democratic participation.
Guo, Li, & Zhang (2025)	China – Urban Schools	Qualitative Study / Poststructural Critical Theory	Marginalization and empowerment	Reform programs can rebuild stakeholder confidence and agency despite systemic barriers.
Haile (2024)	Ethiopia – Public Basic Education	Qualitative Case Study / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Agency in participatory reform	Empowerment arises when reflective dialogue replaces authority-driven decision-making.
Sattar (2022)	Pakistan – Public Schools	Mixed Methods / Transformative Leadership Framework	Stakeholder collaboration and empowerment	Collaboration fosters shared agency, but institutional hierarchies often limit full emancipation.
Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023)	Brazil – Public Basic Education	Policy Analysis / Critical Policy Analysis	Equity and participatory agency	Participatory governance reforms expand stakeholder power and autonomy in decision-making.
Valizadeh (2023)	Iran – National Education Policy	Qualitative Case Study / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Reflective participation and empowerment	Reflective communicative practices build participant confidence and collective agency.

The analysis of international studies in Table 5 shows that stakeholder agency and empowerment in education develop through reflection, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Freire (1970) and Giroux (2011) provide the theoretical foundation for emancipatory governance, viewing education as a transformative act that enables learners and communities to resist domination and become co-creators of change. Freire (1970) emphasizes that learning becomes liberation when dialogue replaces hierarchy, while Giroux (2011) explains that neoliberal systems restrict agency and must be countered through critical pedagogy that reclaims education as a democratic space.

Empirical studies show how these principles translate into practice. In Ethiopia, Haile (2024) documents a participatory school reform that empowered teachers and parents through structured dialogues. School leaders organized monthly reflection meetings where decision-making was based on shared deliberation rather than directives, leading to improved collaboration and community trust. Similarly, Valizadeh (2023) in Iran reports how reflective leadership circles in secondary schools allowed educators to analyze policy issues collectively, giving them agency in proposing reforms. Dlamini (2022) presents a case from South Africa where distributed leadership encouraged teachers and parents to take active roles in school improvement projects, illustrating how collective ownership can replace hierarchical control. In China, Guo, Li, and Zhang (2025) describe how pilot schools in urban districts adopted participatory planning models that restored stakeholder confidence despite the persistence of bureaucratic oversight.

Other studies provide additional mini-cases demonstrating how empowerment evolves within specific contexts. In Pakistan, Sattar (2022) shows that when school committees were redesigned to include teachers, parents, and students, shared goals led to greater trust and accountability. In Brazil, Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023)

describe participatory governance councils that gave teachers and parents authority over budget and curriculum decisions, fostering a sense of autonomy and responsibility. In Qatar, Al-Thani (2025) highlights a feminist critical leadership model in private schools that trained women educators to lead community engagement initiatives, expanding their participation and representation in decision-making.

These cases illustrate that emancipatory governance emerges not only from theoretical critique but also from tangible practices that encourage reflection, dialogue, and co-decision-making. Across contexts, empowerment occurs when educational leaders dismantle rigid hierarchies and create platforms where all stakeholders can speak, decide, and act collectively.

Table 6. Philippine Studies on Stakeholder Agency, Empowerment, and Emancipation in Educational Governance Through The Lens of Critical Theory

Author & Year	Country / Education Level	Method / Theoretical Lens	Governance Focus	Key Insight
Bartolome (2017)	Philippines – Parental Involvement	Literature Review / Critical Pedagogy	Parent and student empowerment	Highlighted that reflective collaboration transforms passive involvement into shared decision-making.
Bartolome (2019)	Philippines – Public Basic Education	Case Study / Freirean Critical Pedagogy	Family empowerment and community voice	Participatory approaches inspired by Freire strengthen parent and student empowerment.
		Case Study / Freirean Critical Pedagogy	Transformative learning and agency	Critical awareness and shared dialogue cultivate authentic community agency.
Guzman (2022)	Philippines – Basic Education	Field Study / Critical Bureaucracy Theory	Empowerment under administrative reform	Empowerment initiatives often stall due to bureaucratic resistance and uneven leadership support.
Jabar (2020)	Philippines – Community Schools	Qualitative Case Study / Critical Theory (Freire)	Community participation and shared governance	Empowerment develops through continuous reflection and collaboration among local stakeholders.
King (2024)	Philippines – National Education Policy	Policy Review / Participatory Democracy Framework	Leadership and decision-making agency	Participatory councils enhanced voice but lacked full power transfer to communities.
Laguda et al. (2023)	Philippines – Basic Education	Policy Evaluation / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Participatory governance and empowerment	Empowerment depends on sustained dialogue, not just structural decentralization.
Saguin (2020)	Philippines – Local Educational Boards	Quantitative Study / Collaborative Leadership Model	Empowerment in local governance	Collaborative boards promote empowerment when leaders model inclusive dialogue.

The analysis of Philippine studies in Table 6 shows that empowerment and agency in education grow when schools institutionalize dialogue, reflection, and shared leadership. Bartolome (2019) illustrates through a case of a public elementary school that Freirean participatory learning encouraged parents and students to take part in curriculum planning and school governance meetings. The program involved family workshops and community assemblies that built confidence among parents who had previously been silent in decision-making. Jabar (2020) presents a similar case from community schools in Mindanao, where collective reflection sessions between teachers and parents created a space for shared planning of local school projects. These examples demonstrate that empowerment in Philippine schools often begins when communities are given sustained opportunities to speak, reflect, and decide together.

Laguda et al. (2023) and King (2024) analyze how empowerment operates within policy structures. Laguda et al. (2023) report that decentralized governance improved participation only when school leaders encouraged regular consultation and reflection, not when reforms focused solely on compliance. In a national context, King (2024) notes that participatory councils at the Department of Education improved stakeholder voice but did not fully devolve authority to local actors. These studies suggest that empowerment requires consistent communicative practice and cannot rely on policy design alone.

Other research explores how leadership style and institutional culture influence agency. Saguin (2020) finds that local educational boards increase empowerment when leaders engage members in open dialogue and shared responsibility. Bartolome (2017) observes that parental involvement becomes transformative when school leaders invite families into collective planning rather than limiting them to support roles. Guzman (2022) describes cases where empowerment initiatives slowed because of bureaucratic resistance and inconsistent administrative support, showing that leadership commitment determines the sustainability of reform. A second study by Bartolome (2019) documents a school-based initiative where critical dialogue sessions between teachers and parents strengthened community agency and built shared ownership of school improvement plans.

Together, these studies show how emancipatory governance in Philippine schools takes concrete form through family empowerment programs, participatory councils, and local board dialogues. Real examples such as the family workshops in Bartolome's (2019) case study and the Mindanao reflection circles in Jabar's (2020) work demonstrate how empowerment becomes actionable when school leaders replace control with communication and collaboration across all levels of governance.

Policy, Structural Barriers, and Inequities in Educational Governance

Table 7. Foreign studies on policy, structural barriers, and inequities in educational governance through the lens of critical theory

Author & Year	Country / Education Level	Method / Theoretical Lens	Governance Focus	Key Insight
Horkheimer & Adorno (1947)	Germany – Philosophy of Education	Theoretical Framework / Critical Theory	Structural domination and cultural reproduction	Institutional hierarchies perpetuate inequity and sustain power asymmetries in educational systems.
Habermas (1981)	Germany – Educational Communication	Theoretical Framework / Critical Theory (Communicative Action)	Bureaucratic rationality and systemic inequity	Instrumental rationality must be criticized for being a root of technocratic governance that marginalizes authentic stakeholder dialogue.
Mahajan (2023)	India – Higher Education Governance	Conceptual Analysis / Critical Theory	Policy-driven inequities and leadership	Governance models driven by efficiency reproduce inequities by silencing marginalized voices.

Bond (2024)	United Kingdom – K–12 Education	Quantitative Policy Study / *Socioeconomic Participation Model*	Parent involvement and class disparity	Socioeconomic status determines participation levels; policies reinforce, not mitigate, inequality.
Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023)	Brazil – Public Basic Education	Policy Analysis / Critical Policy Analysis	Decentralization and structural reform	Unequal resource allocation limits the effects of participatory governance on equity.
Guo, Li, & Zhang (2025)	China – Urban Public Schools	Qualitative Study / Poststructural Critical Analysis	Structural exclusion and inequality	Bureaucratic control and socio-political hierarchies maintain systemic exclusion in governance.
Wang (2024)	China – Basic Education	Policy Review / *Transformative Leadership*	Decentralization barriers	Centralized supervision undercuts reform efforts aiming at equity and inclusivity.
Valizadeh (2023)	Iran – Educational Policy	Qualitative Case Study / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Policy reform and social justice	Equitable governance requires communicative reforms that dismantle elite policy control.
Clarke (2020)	Multi-region (Asia & West) – School Boards	Multi-case Study / Critical Discourse Analysis	Communication fragmentation and structural inequality	Fragmented communication systems are barriers to transparency and stakeholder inclusion.
Elacqua et al. (2021)	Colombia – Local Education Systems	Mixed Methods / *Collaborative Governance*	Structural constraints on local governance	Despite reforms, central oversight and unequal capacities continue to sustain structural inequities.

The synthesis of foreign studies in Table 7 shows that structural inequities in educational governance persist because of institutional hierarchies, bureaucratic control, and unequal access to decision-making. Foundational theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) and Habermas (1981) explain these patterns as outcomes of domination and instrumental rationality. Their work provides the theoretical basis for later empirical research showing that governance systems designed around efficiency and control often reproduce social and educational inequalities. For example, Mahajan (2023) found in Indian higher education that policies meant to modernize leadership structures instead silenced dissenting voices and reinforced elite dominance.

Empirical studies reveal how these structural constraints appear in practice. Bond (2024) identified that in the United Kingdom, parental involvement programs designed to improve school engagement benefited families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds while marginalizing working-class parents who lacked access to school decision spaces. In Brazil, Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023) reported that decentralization efforts improved participation in some regions but failed to address resource gaps between schools, resulting in uneven empowerment. Similarly, Elacqua et al. (2021) documented in Colombia that participatory councils could not overcome unequal capacities among local governments, leaving poorer districts dependent on central authorities. These examples demonstrate that formal participation mechanisms cannot succeed without addressing the material and institutional inequalities embedded within governance systems.

Asian case studies also illustrate how bureaucratic and political hierarchies limit reform. Guo, Li, and Zhang (2025) showed that in Chinese urban schools, administrative control and political oversight restricted grassroots

decision-making. Wang (2024) described similar conditions where decentralized reforms remained symbolic because state supervision retained control of key policy levers. Valizadeh (2023) provided a case from Iran where dialogic reforms within the Ministry of Education allowed local administrators to share in policy discussions, leading to small but visible improvements in transparency and equity. Clarke (2020) found across Asian and Western school boards that fragmented communication among stakeholders blocked mutual accountability and reinforced mistrust.

These studies demonstrate that structural inequality in education governance persists when decision-making remains centralized and communication remains fragmented. Real applications of emancipatory governance appear in limited but significant cases such as Valizadeh's (2023) dialogic reforms in Iran and the participatory councils in Colombia reported by Elacqua et al. (2021). These examples show that critical reflection, communicative dialogue, and equitable power-sharing are essential elements for transforming governance from hierarchical systems toward inclusive and socially just educational structures.

Table 8. Philippine studies on policy, structural barriers, and inequities in educational governance through the lens of critical theory

Author & Year	Country / Education Level	Method / Theoretical Lens	Governance Focus	Key Insight
Bartolome (2017)	Philippines – Public Elementary Education	Literature Review / Critical Pedagogy	Structural inequality and parental involvement	Class and cultural hierarchies impede equitable parent participation.
Bartolome (2019)	Philippines – Public Basic Education	Case Study / Freirean Critical Pedagogy	Power imbalance in governance Empowerment vs. policy control	Social inequities manifest in family-school dynamics and governance participation. Tension between participatory ideals and the realities of centralized policy governance.
Guzman (2022)	Philippines – Basic Education	Qualitative Field Study / Critical Bureaucracy Theory	Bureaucratic inertia and structural exclusion	Bureaucratic rigidity reinforces passive compliance and obstructs participatory reform.
Jabar (2020)	Philippines – Community Schools	Qualitative Study / Critical Theory (Freire)	Policy integration and community participation	Exclusionary policymaking often undermines localized initiatives for equity.
King (2024)	Philippines – National Education	Policy Analysis / Participatory Governance	Power asymmetry in decentralization	Decentralization policies enhance representation but retain central government control.
Laguda et al. (2023)	Philippines – Basic Education	Policy Evaluation / Critical Theory (Habermas)	Decentralization and policy implementation	Structural decentralization without capacity-building perpetuates uneven participation.

Saguin (2020)	Philippines – Local Educational Boards	Quantitative Analysis / Critical Policy Analysis	Accountability and resource distribution	Persistent inequities due to unequal local capacity and institutional favoritism.
		Policy Review / Collaborative Leadership Model	Governance accountability	Accountability frameworks often favor managerial compliance over social equity.

The synthesis of Philippine studies in Table 8 shows that structural inequities in school governance persist because of bureaucratic rigidity, weak decentralization, and cultural hierarchies that limit authentic participation. Guzman (2022) reported that bureaucratic inertia within the Department of Education discourages initiative among school administrators, resulting in a culture of compliance instead of collaboration. Laguda et al. (2023) observed that decentralization reforms in basic education expanded administrative structures but failed to build local capacity, producing uneven participation across regions. King (2024) found that while decentralization policies created participatory spaces through councils and local boards, decision-making authority remained concentrated in central offices. These studies reveal that Philippine educational governance often appears participatory in design but remains hierarchical in practice.

Quantitative and policy-focused analyses also emphasize how inequities persist at the local level. Saguin (2020) identified that local educational boards, though intended to improve accountability, operate within unequal political and fiscal environments that favor schools with better local resources. The study found that accountability frameworks reward compliance with national targets rather than genuine responsiveness to community needs. Bartolome (2017) and Bartolome (2019) linked these inequities to deeper social hierarchies, showing that class and cultural deference prevent parents and families from fully engaging in governance discussions. Jabar (2020) added that localized community efforts for equity are often undermined by policies designed without input from stakeholders, leading to tension between grassroots initiatives and national directives.

Empirical cases further illustrate these structural barriers. In one documented initiative, Bartolome (2019) described how a public elementary school's family engagement program empowered parents to participate in curriculum planning but faced delays due to bureaucratic approval processes. Laguda et al. (2023) reported that in several decentralized schools, participatory management committees lacked decision-making authority to implement reforms without central endorsement. Similarly, Saguin (2020) cited municipalities where local school boards improved transparency in budgeting but struggled to address unequal resource allocation between rural and urban schools.

These studies together highlight how bureaucratic rigidity, centralized policy control, and cultural hierarchies continue to restrict equitable participation in Philippine school governance. Empirical illustrations, such as community programs hindered by slow administrative procedures and limited autonomy in local councils, demonstrate that policy reforms alone cannot remove structural barriers without parallel investments in capacity-building, cultural change, and inclusive dialogue. These findings collectively address the review's objectives by revealing how power, participation, and agency operate within educational governance structures, both in Philippine and international contexts.

Implications

The findings of this systematic review extend the existing literature by confirming that hierarchical governance and limited stakeholder participation persist across diverse educational contexts, even under decentralization policies designed to promote inclusivity. Consistent with Mahajan (2023) and Soares Furtado Oliveira et al. (2023), the review reveals that structural reforms often replicate bureaucratic hierarchies rather than dismantle them. This challenges earlier assumptions that decentralization alone ensures equity or shared power in school systems. Instead, the synthesis suggests that transformation requires communicative action and cultural change, echoing Habermas's (1981) argument that true democracy depends on reflective dialogue and mutual understanding. The review contributes new insight by connecting these theoretical principles with contemporary

cases from both developed and developing nations, highlighting how administrative control, socio-cultural deference, and policy inertia limit genuine empowerment.

From a professional standpoint, these findings carry significant implications for educators and school leaders. The literature demonstrates that effective participatory leadership depends on the ability to institutionalize reflective and dialogic practices. Studies by Laguda et al. (2023), Haile (2024), and Valizadeh (2023) show that school communities that adopt regular consultation and shared decision-making processes foster deeper trust and stronger ownership of outcomes. Educators and administrators must therefore transition from managerial to facilitative roles, prioritizing communication, empathy, and critical reflection. Leadership training and professional development should incorporate modules on participatory dialogue, critical pedagogy, and collaborative governance, following Bartolome's (2019) and Dlamini's (2022) evidence that inclusive leadership transforms compliance into co-creation. This change in leadership preparation could reframe educational management as a process of empowerment rather than control.

The results also offer direction for policy reform. Policymakers should recognize that decentralization without investment in local capacity and communicative structures cannot sustain democratic governance. Philippine studies by Guzman (2022) and King (2024) demonstrate that participatory mechanisms remain symbolic unless communities have the knowledge, resources, and authority to act. Policies should therefore support continuous stakeholder dialogue through institutionalized councils and local education boards with genuine decision-making authority. Moreover, as shown in the international studies of Elacqua et al. (2021) and Wang (2024), resource disparities and bureaucratic oversight weaken participatory efforts; hence, equitable funding formulas and transparent accountability systems are needed to reinforce inclusion. Governments must also integrate critical and ethical reasoning frameworks into education leadership standards to promote fairness and communicative rationality at every administrative level.

Despite these insights, several gaps and limitations remain. The review found that most empirical studies emphasize policy and structural analysis but seldom explore the lived experiences of marginalized stakeholders. Few longitudinal or mixed-method investigations have assessed how dialogic and emancipatory governance evolve over time. This gap underscores the need for future research that examines how power is negotiated in day-to-day school interactions and how participatory governance affects learning, morale, and community cohesion. Methodologically, the review's reliance on English-language and peer-reviewed sources may have excluded localized or unpublished cases that capture more diverse voices. Future studies could expand linguistic and regional scope to build a more inclusive evidence base. Nevertheless, the use of PRISMA-guided procedures, triangulated coding, and thematic synthesis in this review reinforces the reliability and transparency of its findings.

In conclusion, the review affirms that governance reform in education must be grounded in critical dialogue, shared authority, and continuous reflection. It challenges traditional managerial approaches and reframes leadership as an ethical and communicative practice. By aligning policy, professional training, and community engagement with these principles, education systems can move closer to realizing participatory and emancipatory governance that empowers all stakeholders to act as partners in shaping equitable learning environments.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review set out to examine how Critical Theory informs and transforms educational governance by interrogating power relations, participation, and emancipation in both international and Philippine contexts. The central question guiding the review asked how critical perspectives reshape understandings of leadership, stakeholder engagement, and policy structures within education systems traditionally governed by hierarchy and control. Through the analysis of twenty-eight (28) studies, the review revealed that while decentralization and participatory reforms have been widely adopted, their implementation often remains at the symbolic level. Hierarchical and bureaucratic logics persist beneath the surface of reform, suggesting that governance in education continues to privilege control and efficiency over reflection, communication, and empowerment.

The synthesis demonstrated that meaningful transformation emerges where governance incorporates reflective dialogue and shared agency, as seen in the works of Valizadeh (2023), Haile (2024), and Laguda et al. (2023). These studies, together with foundational theorists such as Habermas (1981) and Freire (1970), affirm that dialogue is not merely a procedural element but the ethical core of democratic leadership. By positioning participation as a communicative and moral act, Critical Theory reframes governance as an evolving practice of negotiation and mutual recognition rather than mere compliance with administrative protocols. This insight challenges conventional assumptions that policy reform or structural decentralization alone can democratize education.

The findings contribute to the broader field by offering an integrated framework where governance, leadership, and empowerment are understood through the interplay of culture, communication, and critical reflection. In doing so, the study reinforces and extends existing literature that calls for education systems to move beyond technocratic administration toward emancipatory and justice-oriented governance. As Freire (1970) once wrote, "Education is freedom only when it empowers people to transform the world," a sentiment reflected in the transformative cases found in Ethiopia, Brazil, and the Philippines.

Practically, the conclusions underscore the need for leaders and policymakers to embed critical dialogue, participatory councils, and reflective training into governance structures. Theoretically, this work strengthens the application of Critical Theory as a tool for reimagining school leadership and stakeholder relations. Policy-wise, it calls for decentralization models that go beyond formality by equipping communities with genuine authority, transparency, and resources.

While the review adhered to systematic procedures under PRISMA guidelines, it was limited by its focus on English-language, peer-reviewed sources, which may exclude valuable local or non-traditional scholarship. Future studies should expand to multilingual, longitudinal, and ethnographic research that explores the lived experiences of teachers, parents, and students engaged in emancipatory governance.

Ultimately, this review affirms that educational governance is not a fixed hierarchy but a living process shaped by voice, power, and reflection. The author contends that the pursuit of equity and justice in education begins where dialogue replaces domination and where leadership becomes a shared journey toward collective transformation.

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