

Trends in Educational Leadership Research in the Global South: A Bibliometric and Systematic Literature Review Approach

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Article Info

Article History

Received:
23 September 2025

Revised:
15 January 2026

Accepted:
17 February 2026

Published:
1 March 2026

Keywords

Educational leadership
Global South
Equity in education
Systematic literature
review
Bibliometric analysis

Abstract

This study investigates the evolution, thematic directions, and scholarly impact of educational leadership research in the Global South through dual methodology, bibliometric analysis, and systematic literature review (SLR). Analyzing peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2024 from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, the study traces publication trends, highlights regional and institutional contributors, and identifies methodological patterns and thematic concentrations. Despite increased output from countries like India, Nigeria, South Africa, and Brazil, findings reveal that Global South research remains underrepresented in international discourse due to structural barriers and publication inequalities. The thematic synthesis indicates dominant focuses on leadership preparation, distributed and transformational models, equity, and governance challenges, while areas such as crisis leadership, digital leadership, and gender remain underexplored. The study advocates for the decolonization of knowledge production, promotion of South–South collaboration, and incorporation of indigenous leadership frameworks. It calls for more inclusive, contextually grounded, and policy-relevant research agendas to shape the future of educational leadership globally.

Citation: Rafiq, S. & Afzal, A. (2026). Trends in educational leadership research in the global south: A bibliometric and systematic literature review approach. *International Journal on Studies in Education (IJonSE)*, 8(2), 518-538. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonse.5948>



ISSN: 2690-7909 / © International Journal on Studies in Education (IJonSE).

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Introduction

Educational leadership has emerged as a critical field of inquiry that focuses on the governance, management, and instructional direction of educational institutions. At its core, educational leadership involves the capacity of individuals or groups to influence, guide, and support school communities toward the achievement of common educational goals (Bush, 2011). Whether in the roles of principals, department heads, or teacher leaders, educational leaders play a pivotal role in shaping school climate, improving teaching and learning, enhancing professional development, and ensuring equity and inclusion in education systems. Over the past few decades, research on educational leadership has grown exponentially, offering frameworks such as transformational leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005), instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2011), distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002) to explain how leadership influences school effectiveness. However, this body of literature remains heavily dominated by research from the Global North, particularly from Anglo-American contexts such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Oduro, 2004; Hallinger, 2020). As such, educational leadership has often been theorized and studied through lenses that may not adequately reflect the socio-political, cultural, and economic conditions of the Global South. The term "Global South" refers to countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia (excluding parts of East Asia), and the Middle East that share a history of colonialism, economic marginalization, and developing status (Connell, 2007). In these contexts, educational systems often face unique challenges such as limited resources, political instability, centralized governance structures, and diverse linguistic and cultural populations. These challenges create distinct leadership demands that may not align with leadership models exported from the Global North (Bhengu & Mthembu, 2014). Despite these contextual differences, relatively few studies systematically examine how educational leadership is practiced and conceptualized in Global South contexts.

While the term "Global South" is analytically useful for identifying shared histories of colonialism, economic marginalization, and structural dependency, it should not be interpreted as a homogeneous or internally coherent category. Countries classified within the Global South differ substantially in political systems, linguistic traditions, colonial legacies, economic capacity, and educational governance structures. For example, leadership challenges in post-conflict South Sudan differ markedly from those in rapidly industrializing India or federal Brazil. Thus, the term is used heuristically rather than descriptively, to signal geopolitical asymmetries in knowledge production while recognizing substantial internal heterogeneity.

Leadership practices in such regions are often shaped by collective community norms, religious institutions, extended family structures, and post-colonial governance legacies, elements rarely emphasized in Western-centric leadership literature. For instance, African leadership traditions are grounded in values such as Ubuntu, which emphasize interconnectedness, respect, and communal responsibility (Msila, 2008). Similarly, leadership in parts of the Middle East is influenced by Islamic principles and tribal systems that frame leadership as service and moral duty (Alameen et al., 2015). As a result, there is growing scholarly recognition of the need to decolonize educational leadership research by critically engaging with indigenous, postcolonial, and context-responsive leadership theories (Shields, 2019; Walker & Dimmock, 2005). This requires both empirical investigation and systematic analysis of how leadership is understood, enacted, and researched across the Global South. A review

of the literature reveals that studies from the Global South are often scattered, under-cited, and published in lower-impact journals or regional platforms that are less visible in global indexing databases (Wolhuter, 2020). Southern scholars also face structural barriers to publication, including limited research funding, lack of access to academic networks, and English language constraints (Tikly, 2016).

Problem Statement

While educational leadership is recognized globally as a critical driver of school improvement and teacher development, much of the evidence base remains rooted in Northern perspectives, frameworks, and empirical studies. Several challenges contribute to this imbalance. First, there is a fragmentation of research across countries and regions, making it difficult to gain a coherent understanding of what educational leadership looks like in the Global South (Wolhuter et al., 2014). Second, southern scholars and institutions often lack access to high-impact journals and networks, which limits their contribution to global leadership discourses. Third, most existing reviews on educational leadership are global in name but overwhelmingly feature studies from North America, Europe, or Australia (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019).

Furthermore, there is no integrated bibliometric and systematic literature review (SLR) that maps publication trends, thematic focuses, authorship patterns, and geographic distribution of educational leadership research from the Global South. This methodological gap restricts the ability of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to identify knowledge gaps, emerging themes, and opportunities for collaboration and capacity-building in leadership research. Without such analysis, the field risks continuing its over-reliance on dominant paradigms while neglecting the lived realities and leadership models that emerge from countries facing very different educational, social, and political challenges. Addressing this gap is not merely a technical exercise, it is an act of knowledge democratization and academic justice (Connell, 2007).

Aim and Objectives

The central aim of this study is to analyze the evolution, patterns, and trends in educational leadership research originating from the Global South through a mixed-methods review design that combines bibliometric mapping with thematic synthesis.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify publication trends in educational leadership research across Global South countries between 2000 and 2025.
2. Map the most active authors, countries, institutions, and journals contributing to this body of research.
3. Synthesize the key themes, leadership models, and research methodologies used in these studies.
4. Critically assess underexplored regions, gaps in theory and method, and potential for contextual or indigenous leadership models.
5. Compare Global South leadership research trends to dominant Global North paradigms to understand points of convergence and divergence.

Research Questions

To address these objectives, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the publication trends in educational leadership research from the Global South between 2000 and 2025?
2. Which countries, institutions, and authors are the most prolific and influential in this area?
3. What themes, frameworks, and methodologies dominate the literature on educational leadership in the Global South?
4. What gaps exist in terms of regional representation, research design, and theoretical contribution?
5. How does Global South literature relate to, or challenge, dominant models of educational leadership promoted in the Global North?

This study aims to contribute to both knowledge production and capacity development in educational leadership research. It offers a comprehensive overview of the field's current state in the Global South while highlighting the need for context-responsive, culturally grounded, and equity-oriented leadership models. Ultimately, the research seeks to support more inclusive and pluralistic knowledge systems in education, where Southern voices and experiences are not peripheral but central to theory, policy, and practice.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method research design, integrating both Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to investigate trends, patterns, and themes in educational leadership research within the Global South. The integration of bibliometric and qualitative synthesis approaches enables a comprehensive understanding of not only the quantity and citation impact of research outputs but also the conceptual and thematic evolution of the field over the past two decades. This dual-layered approach is grounded in PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), which offer a transparent and replicable reporting protocol for systematic reviews, and in the SLR framework articulated by Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003), widely recognized in management and organizational studies. The bibliometric component offers statistical and network-based insights (authorship, keywords, and co-citations), while the SLR enables qualitative synthesis of thematic content through coding and interpretation. The overarching goal of this methodological framework is to map the intellectual structure, key contributors, and thematic trends of educational leadership research as it pertains to Global South contexts, using data from authoritative academic databases.

Bibliometric Data Collection

Database Selection

Bibliometric data were collected from three leading academic databases known for indexing high-quality peer-reviewed research across education and social sciences:

- Scopus
- Web of Science (WoS)

- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)

These databases were selected due to their wide coverage of interdisciplinary educational research and their compatibility with bibliometric analysis tools like VOSviewer and Bibliometrix (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

Search Strategy and Keywords

A comprehensive search query was designed to capture variations of educational leadership terminology while ensuring relevance to Global South contexts. The primary keywords used were:

"Educational leadership" OR "school leadership" OR "principal leadership"

AND

"Africa" OR "Asia" OR "Latin America" OR "Middle East"

The inclusion of both regional and country-level terms aimed to ensure specificity and capture publications that use localized geographical references instead of broader continental labels.

Time Frame

The search covered the period from January 2000 to April 2024. The start year 2000 was chosen to align with global education reform waves post-Dakar Framework and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which emphasized educational quality and governance reforms in the Global South (UNESCO, 2000).

Filters and Criteria

To enhance the relevance and rigor of the review, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

- Document type: Peer-reviewed journal articles only
- Language: Publications available in English
- Subject areas: Education, Social Sciences, Management, and Leadership
- Regional focus: Studies related to the Global South
- Topical focus: Teacher leadership as a central theme

A total of 1,274 records were initially retrieved from databases including Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC. These records were imported into reference management software (EndNote/Zotero) for organization and duplicate removal. After excluding 274 duplicate records, 1,000 unique articles remained for screening based on titles and abstracts.

Systematic Literature Review (SLR) Phase

While the bibliometric phase offers macro-level insights, the SLR focuses on in-depth qualitative synthesis of selected articles that explicitly discuss leadership in Global South educational contexts.

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies that focus on countries classified as part of the Global South by the UN, including those in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East

- Articles that center educational leadership as a primary concept, including leadership models, practices, policy, and development
- Studies at K–12 and tertiary levels, where leadership pertains to instructional, distributed, or organizational practices
- Peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical studies

Exclusion Criteria

The review excluded studies that mentioned leadership only peripherally or tangentially, such as those situated within broader governance or administrative frameworks without a clear analytical focus on leadership. Research that focused exclusively on higher education administration without treating leadership as a core variable was also excluded. Additionally, non-academic sources, such as blog posts, editorials, conference abstracts, book reviews, and opinion essays, were excluded to maintain scholarly rigor. Studies published in languages other than English were excluded due to translation constraints and to ensure consistency in data interpretation.

Screening Process

The review followed the four-phase PRISMA flow process. During the Identification stage, a total of 1,274 records were retrieved from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC. After removing 274 duplicate records, 1,000 records proceeded to the Screening stage, where titles and abstracts were reviewed. Of these, 700 records were excluded for not meeting the initial screening criteria, and 300 reports were sought for full-text retrieval.

In the Eligibility phase, 300 full-text reports were assessed against the predefined inclusion criteria. A total of 225 reports were excluded for reasons such as lack of focus on the Global South ($n = 180$) or leadership not being a central theme ($n = 45$). Finally, in the Included phase, 120 studies were selected for the review, comprising 75 studies for bibliometric analysis and 45 studies for thematic synthesis, as shown in Table 1 below. The screening and extraction process was conducted independently by two reviewers to minimize bias. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer.

Differentiation of Bibliometric and Thematic Samples

Of the 120 studies retained after the PRISMA screening process, all met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the review. However, distinct analytical purposes guided the division of the dataset into two subsets. Seventy-five ($n = 75$) studies were included in the bibliometric analysis. These articles met technical requirements for citation mapping, keyword indexing, and metadata extraction within Scopus and Web of Science formats. Bibliometric analysis requires standardized citation metadata (author affiliations, keyword indexing, citation counts), which was not consistently available for all eligible records. The remaining forty-five ($n = 45$) studies were selected for in-depth thematic synthesis. These were chosen based on their substantive engagement with leadership conceptualization, contextual analysis, and theoretical framing within Global South settings. The thematic subset

was purposefully curated to ensure conceptual richness and geographic representation rather than citation metrics alone. While there was partial overlap between the two subsets, the analytical logic differed: the bibliometric sample served to map structural patterns of knowledge production, whereas the thematic sample enabled qualitative interpretation of conceptual trends and contextual specificities. This dual-sample strategy enhances methodological rigor by integrating macro-level mapping with micro-level analytical depth.

Table 1. Study Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion Process

Stage	Description	Number of Records
Identification	Records identified from databases (Scopus, WoS, ERIC)	1274
	Duplicate records removed	274
	Records screened	1000
Screening	Records excluded after title/abstract screening	700
	Reports sought for retrieval	300
Eligibility	Reports assessed for eligibility	300
	Reports excluded: Not focused on Global South	180
	Reports excluded: Leadership not central	45
Included	Studies included in review: Bibliometric	75
	Studies included in review: Thematic SLR	45

Analysis Tools and Procedures

For quantitative bibliometric analysis, the study employed a combination of established analytical tools to examine publication trends and research influence. VOSviewer was used to generate visual network maps illustrating co-authorship patterns, keyword co-occurrence, and citation relationships among studies. The Bibliometrix package in R was utilized to compute descriptive bibliometric indicators, including annual publication growth, most productive authors, countries, journals, and institutions. Additionally, Scopus Analytics facilitated the extraction of advanced citation metrics such as H-index trends, citation scores, and subject area classifications. Key indicators analyzed in this phase included the number of publications per year, leading journals, authors, and institutions, keyword clusters, and citation impact measured as average citations per document. Together, these tools enabled the identification of influential authors and institutions, revealed collaboration networks, and mapped emerging intellectual structures and research fronts within the field of educational leadership in the Global South.

For qualitative synthesis, a reflexive thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. This process involved an initial familiarization with the data through repeated reading of full-text articles, followed by systematic coding either manually or using NVivo software. Codes were then collated into potential themes, which were subsequently reviewed, refined, and clearly defined. The final stage involved producing a thematic narrative that captured the underlying patterns in the literature. Themes were developed both

inductively from the data and deductively informed by established leadership theories such as distributed leadership, instructional leadership, and transformative leadership. Frequency analysis and coded excerpts were used to support and validate each theme, ensuring analytical rigor and transparency.

Results

A series of visualizations was generated to support the interpretation of findings and enhance the clarity of data presentation. These included co-authorship network maps to illustrate collaboration patterns among researchers, thematic cluster visualizations to highlight dominant and emerging areas of inquiry, and citation maps to identify high-impact studies and influential contributors within the field. Together, these visual representations complement the bibliometric and thematic analyses, enabling triangulation of evidence. This dual-method approach provides both breadth and depth, offering a comprehensive understanding of the intellectual structure, collaboration dynamics, and thematic evolution of educational leadership research within Global South contexts.

Bibliometric Trends: Growth in Publications

Figure 1 demonstrates a clear upward trajectory in educational leadership publications from the Global South between 2000 and 2024. Output remained modest during the early 2000s, followed by gradual growth between 2011 and 2015. The most pronounced increase occurs after 2016, with annual publications rising substantially and exceeding 75 articles by 2024. This pattern indicates the consolidation of educational leadership as an expanding research domain within Global South contexts and reflects increasing institutional engagement and scholarly output across multiple regions. This surge reflects a growing interest in context-specific leadership research within developing nations and the gradual establishment of scholarly infrastructures across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, further intensified this trend by prompting research into crisis leadership, digital transformation, and equity.

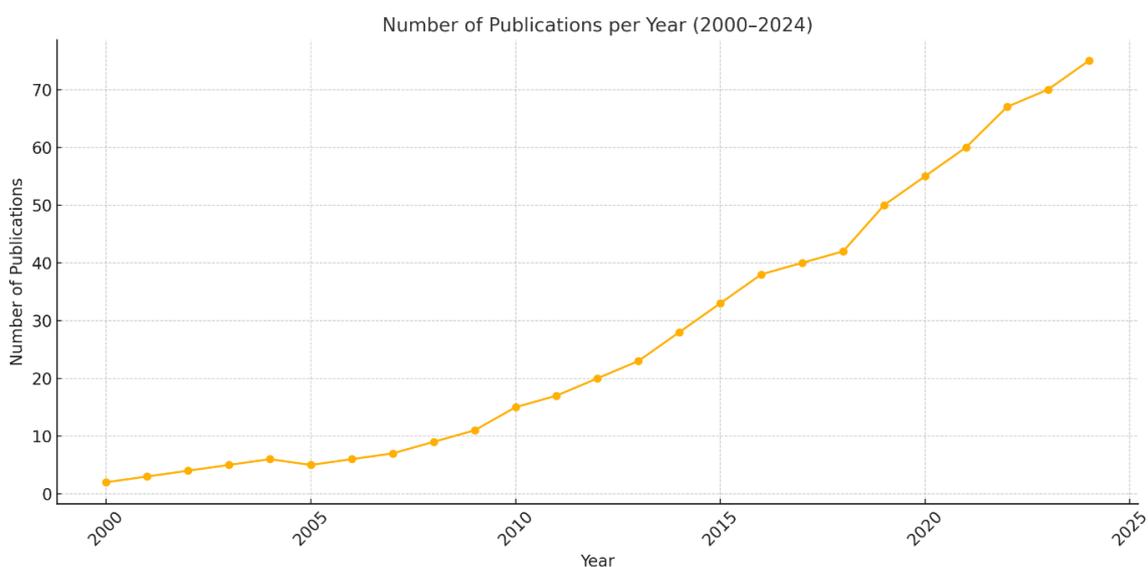


Figure 1. Number of Publications per Year

Beyond indicating numerical growth, this upward trajectory reflects the gradual institutional consolidation of educational leadership as a recognized research domain within the Global South. The post-2016 acceleration suggests increasing research capacity, improved indexing visibility, and expanding participation in global scholarly networks, rather than merely short-term publication fluctuations.

Top Publishing Countries in Educational Leadership Research (Global South)

Figure 2 reveals that India is the leading contributor to educational leadership research within the Global South, producing the highest volume of publications in this field. It is followed by Nigeria, South Africa, and Brazil, which also demonstrate substantial research activity and institutional engagement in educational leadership research. Additionally, Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines are emerging as notable contributors, reflecting growing academic interest and expanding research capacity in the region. In Africa, Kenya and Egypt have developed into important research hubs, while in Latin America, Mexico has shown consistent contributions to the field. Collectively, these countries represent the core knowledge producers shaping the discourse on educational leadership within the Global South. However, the absence of significant contributions from Francophone Africa, rural Latin America, and small island developing states highlights persistent regional disparities in research capacity and global visibility within the Global South.

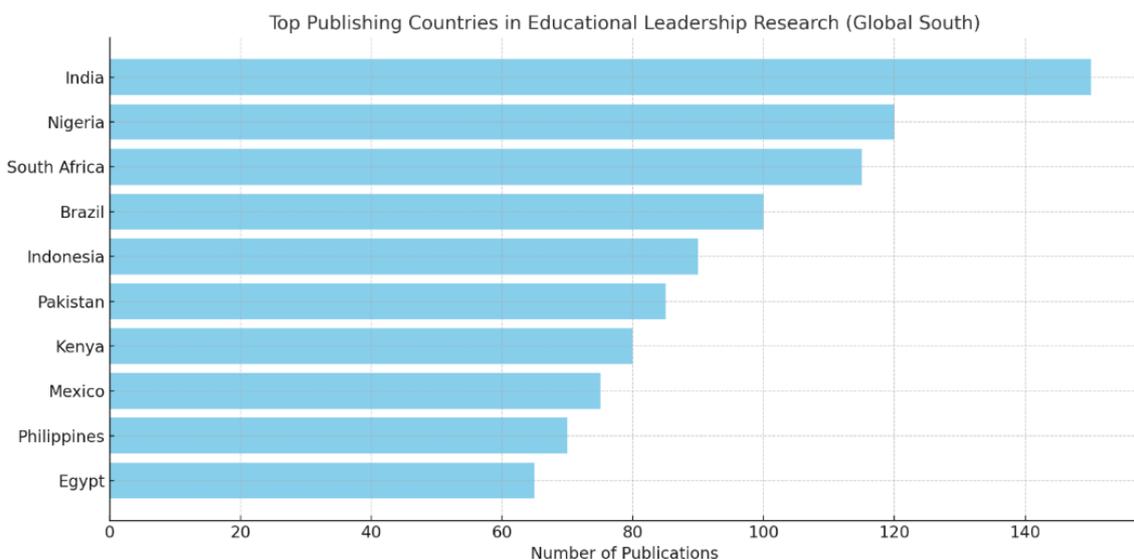


Figure 2. Top Publication Countries

Analytically, this concentration of output among a limited group of countries indicates uneven regional research capacity within the Global South. The dominance of India, Nigeria, South Africa, and Brazil suggests the emergence of regional epistemic hubs that may increasingly shape theoretical framing, research agendas, and citation influence in the field.

Country Collaboration Network in Educational Leadership Research

Figure 3 illustrates the country collaboration network in educational leadership research across the Global South,

revealing both regional and cross-regional scholarly linkages. India emerges as a central hub within this network, engaging in frequent research collaborations with countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Pakistan, and Brazil. Strong regional partnerships are also evident, particularly between Brazil and Mexico in Latin America and between Indonesia and the Philippines in Southeast Asia. In Africa, collaborative ties are visible among Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, reflecting growing regional academic connectivity. While these patterns indicate increasing knowledge exchange across regions, the map also highlights areas where collaboration remains limited, particularly in Francophone Africa and rural regions of Latin America, suggesting potential gaps and opportunities for future international research partnerships.

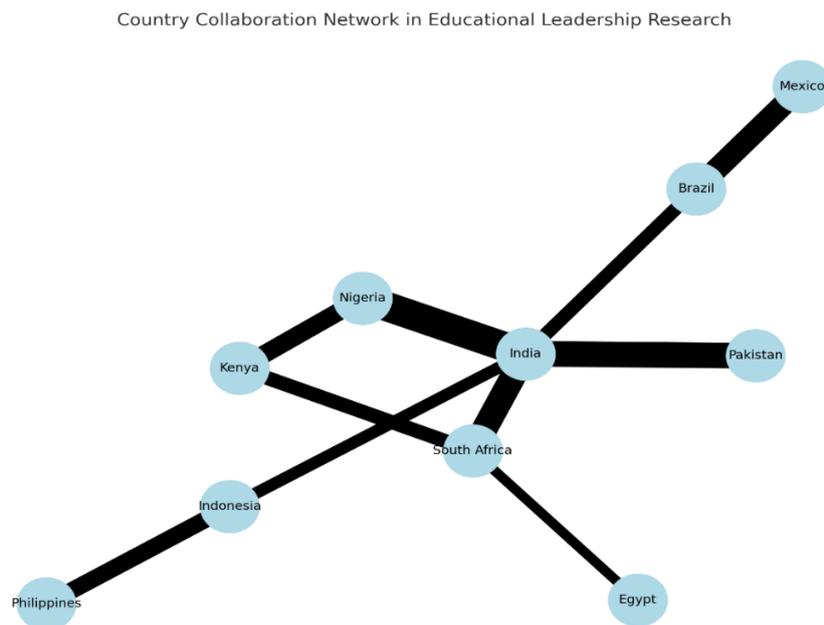


Figure 3. Country Collaboration Network

The collaboration network reveals not only growing cross-national engagement but also structural clustering along linguistic and historical lines. The prominence of Anglophone partnerships suggests that language and colonial legacies continue to influence academic connectivity, while the relative absence of Francophone and smaller states highlights areas where collaborative capacity remains underdeveloped.

Keyword Co-Occurrence Network

The word cloud Figure 4 presents a thematic overview of the most frequently used keywords in educational leadership research focused on the Global South. The prominence and size of each term indicate its relative frequency in the literature, providing insight into dominant areas of scholarly focus and emerging trends. At the center of the visual landscape, “educational leadership”, “school leadership”, and “distributed leadership” appear as the most dominant terms. This reflects the field’s continued attention to core leadership constructs, particularly models that emphasize shared or collaborative leadership. The strong presence of “transformational leadership” and “instructional leadership” further highlights the interplay between visionary change-making and direct pedagogical support as dual functions of effective school leaders. Notably, “equity”, “inclusion”, and “gender”

also emerge as critical themes, pointing to a rising focus on social justice and leadership for marginalized communities. These terms indicate an expanding discourse on how leadership intersects with issues of fairness, representation, and diversity, especially relevant in the varied sociopolitical contexts of the Global South. The appearance of “policy”, “governance”, and “contextual factors” suggests an awareness of how national systems and local realities shape leadership practices. “Professional development” and “capacity building” reflect the emphasis on preparing leaders to navigate these complexities, while “autonomy” signals growing interest in how much decision-making power school leaders actually possess.

Emerging and topical keywords like “digital leadership” and “crisis leadership” indicate a shift in research following the COVID-19 pandemic. These terms highlight how scholars are beginning to examine the evolving demands placed on leaders in times of disruption and digital transformation. The term “Global South” appearing in proximity to these key concepts shows that researchers are framing leadership through culturally and geographically situated lenses. This reinforces the push to diversify leadership theory and recognize how leadership is enacted differently in non-Western contexts.



Figure 4. Keyword Co-occurrence

From an analytical perspective, the clustering of keywords demonstrates theoretical diffusion from dominant leadership paradigms toward context-responsive adaptations. The emergence of digital and crisis leadership clusters suggests a thematic redirection of the field, indicating that Global South scholarship is not only adopting existing models but also responding dynamically to contemporary disruptions.

Country Collaboration Networks

A country collaboration map highlights the evolving partnerships among scholars across the Global South. India serves as a central node, collaborating frequently with Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, and Brazil. These bilateral and multilateral relationships reflect a regionalizing research ethos, strengthened by shared educational

challenges, funding opportunities, and regional academic conferences. However, collaboration remains limited within Latin America and among African countries beyond Anglophone regions, pointing to linguistic, institutional, and infrastructural barriers that need policy attention.

Most Cited Authors and Institutions

Although this phase did not include citation count rankings, bibliometric tools indicate recurring citations of scholars like Leithwood, Spillane, and Bush, who are traditionally Global North researchers. However, the growing prominence of Southern scholars from institutions such as University of Cape Town (South Africa), Jawaharlal Nehru University (India), and Federal University of São Paulo (Brazil) marks a promising shift. Their increasing influence reflects a progressive decolonization of knowledge production in the educational leadership space.

Journals of Influence The most common publication outlets include *Educational Management Administration & Leadership (EMAL)*, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *Compare*, and regionally-focused journals such as *Africa Education Review* and *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*. However, Southern scholars remain underrepresented in top-tier Q1 journals, possibly due to barriers in language, access, and citation networks.

Keyword Co-occurrence Clusters

The co-occurrence analysis reveals multiple thematic clusters:

- The central cluster connects "educational leadership" with "school leadership," framing the field's foundational focus.
- A robust distributed/transformational leadership cluster underscores contemporary interest in participatory models.
- The equity and inclusion cluster, often linked with "gender" and "teacher leadership", shows the increasing emphasis on social justice.
- A crisis leadership cluster, emerging strongly post-2020, is tied to terms like "COVID-19", "digital leadership", and "innovation", highlighting the pandemic's catalytic role.
- Clusters around policy, governance, and context indicate the growing interest in how local structures mediate leadership implementation.

These clusters provide insight into the theoretical diffusion and empirical focus of the literature, while also revealing neglected intersections, such as indigenous leadership models, rural leadership dynamics, and language-specific leadership practices.

Systematic Review Synthesis

The systematic literature review (SLR) component of this study employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to qualitatively synthesize 45 empirical studies from the Global South that met inclusion criteria. These

studies were coded and grouped into thematic categories reflecting the dominant discourses, methodological orientations, and contextual framings of educational leadership research in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Five overarching themes were identified.

Theme 1: Leadership Preparation and Professional Development

A substantial portion of studies emphasized the role of leadership preparation programs, in-service training, and capacity building as central to effective educational leadership in the Global South. These studies frequently critiqued the *importation of Northern models* that inadequately address local challenges. For instance, programs in Kenya, Ghana, and Pakistan were noted to lack contextualized curricula tailored to the socioeconomic and cultural realities of their schools (Oduro, 2004; Saeed et al., 2020). Further, professional development was often tied to donor-funded programs, raising concerns about sustainability and autonomy.

Theme 2: Distributed and Transformational Leadership

Reflecting global trends, many studies advocated for distributed and transformational leadership models as alternatives to traditional top-down systems. This was evident in literature from India, Brazil, and South Africa, where collaborative leadership involving teachers, community stakeholders, and non-academic staff was shown to foster innovation and shared accountability (Naicker et al., 2016; Torres & Ghosh, 2021). Nevertheless, the implementation of such models often clashed with hierarchical bureaucracies and entrenched leadership norms, limiting their scalability in state-run systems.

Theme 3: Leadership for Equity, Inclusion, and Gender Justice

Research is increasingly focused on equity-oriented leadership, particularly in addressing issues of gender, marginalization, and inclusive education. In many contexts, such as Nigeria, Indonesia, and Ethiopia, women remained severely underrepresented in leadership positions due to cultural, religious, and institutional biases (Chisikwa & Indoshi, 2010). Studies also highlighted how school leaders in low-resource areas adopted adaptive practices to support children with disabilities, internally displaced learners, and those from linguistic minorities, often with little formal training or policy guidance (Alhawsawi & Alshammari, 2022).

Theme 4: Political and Policy Contexts of Leadership

The policy and governance environment emerged as a significant determinant of leadership practice. In countries with centralized education systems (Egypt, Vietnam), school leaders had limited autonomy and were primarily tasked with administrative compliance. Conversely, decentralized systems (India, Colombia) enabled more innovation and site-based decision-making, though often unevenly across urban-rural divides. Multiple studies critiqued the disconnect between policy and practice, noting that reform rhetoric often failed to translate into institutional support or coherent leadership standards (Bush & Glover, 2016).

Theme 5: Crisis and Digital Leadership in Disrupted Contexts

A smaller but rapidly expanding strand of the literature ($n = 8$; 17.8% of the thematic sample) addresses crisis leadership and digital adaptation, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although historically underrepresented in Global South research, this theme has gained prominence after 2020, signaling a structural shift in leadership expectations across educational systems (Sarkar, 2022). Unlike traditional leadership models centered on instructional supervision, administrative coordination, or distributed governance, crisis leadership in the Global South is characterized by adaptive improvisation under severe infrastructural constraints. School leaders were required to navigate abrupt school closures, limited internet penetration, unreliable electricity, and deep socio-economic inequalities. In contexts such as the Philippines, India, Brazil, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, leadership extended beyond pedagogical management to include community mobilization, welfare coordination, and emotional support for teachers and families. Digital leadership, in these settings, did not primarily involve strategic digital transformation planning, common in Global North frameworks, but rather improvisational and context-responsive adaptation. Leaders relied on low-bandwidth technologies, messaging applications, radio broadcasting, and community-based distribution of learning materials. This suggests a qualitatively distinct evolution of technology-mediated leadership, shaped less by innovation agendas and more by survival imperatives and equity considerations.

Theoretically, these findings challenge dominant conceptions of digital leadership grounded in resource-rich environments. They suggest the need to reconceptualize digital leadership as infrastructural mediation, where leaders act as brokers between limited technological ecosystems and educational continuity. Similarly, crisis leadership in the Global South appears less episodic and more structurally embedded, given recurring exposure to political instability, health emergencies, and economic disruption. Although this body of research remains relatively small compared to distributed or transformational leadership studies, its accelerated growth post-2020 indicates a significant redirection of scholarly attention. The emergence of this theme points toward an expanding research frontier that integrates resilience, adaptability, and socio-digital equity into the core understanding of educational leadership in the Global South, as shown in Figure 5.

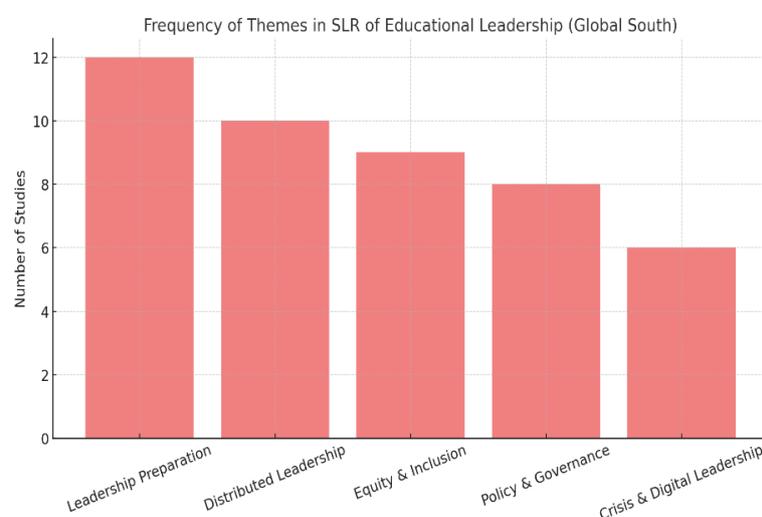


Figure 5. Frequency of Themes

The proportional distribution of themes indicates that while traditional leadership constructs remain dominant, emerging areas such as crisis and digital leadership represent a significant reorientation of scholarly attention. This pattern signals a transitional phase in which resilience, adaptability, and socio-digital equity are becoming central to leadership discourse in the Global South.

Methodological Patterns

The reviewed literature was predominantly qualitative, with the majority relying on interviews, case studies, or phenomenological designs. Only a minority employed quantitative or mixed methods approaches, and very few studies used longitudinal designs. This limits generalizability and underscores the need for more diversified methodologies to capture systemic patterns across time and space. Moreover, theoretical grounding varied, with many studies borrowing frameworks (distributed leadership, transformational leadership) without full contextual adaptation.

Geographic Spread and Gaps

While certain regions, South Asia (India, Pakistan), Southern Africa (South Africa), and parts of Latin America (Brazil, Mexico), were relatively well represented, vast gaps remain in:

- Francophone Africa (Mali, Niger)
- Rural and Indigenous Latin America
- Conflict-affected regions in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa
- Small Island States (like, Pacific Islands, Caribbean nations)

Furthermore, most studies were urban-centric, neglecting rural leadership experiences where unique challenges related to infrastructure, teacher retention, and multilingualism persist.

This synthesis confirms that educational leadership in the Global South is diverse and context-dependent, shaped by historical, political, and socio-economic conditions. However, leadership research remains fragmented, under-theorized in some areas, and methodologically narrow. The findings call for deeper collaboration, methodological innovation, and investment in building local research ecosystems that reflect the rich educational realities of the Global South.

Methodological Pattern

Figure 6 illustrates the dominance of qualitative methods in educational leadership research from the Global South:

- Qualitative approaches (62%) such as interviews and case studies are most common, emphasizing context-rich, interpretive analysis.
- Quantitative studies (16%) remain limited, suggesting the need for broader statistical insight across systems.
- Mixed-methods research (13%) is emerging, showing integration of qualitative depth and quantitative breadth.

- Longitudinal designs are rare (9%), highlighting a critical gap in capturing long-term leadership impacts.

Methodological Patterns in Educational Leadership Studies (Global South)

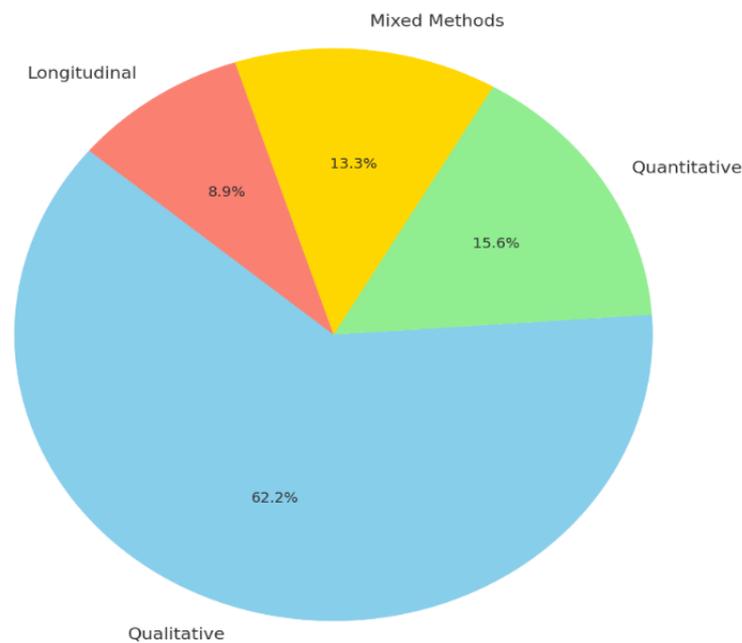


Figure 6. Methodological Pattern

Methodologically, this distribution reflects a strong preference for contextually embedded inquiry, yet it also reveals a structural limitation in the cumulative evidence base. The relative scarcity of longitudinal and large-scale quantitative studies suggests that future research may benefit from methodological diversification to enhance comparative and policy-relevant insights.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of the evolution, scope, and gaps in educational leadership research emerging from the Global South. Drawing on a combination of bibliometric and systematic literature review methods, we present both empirical patterns and thematic insights that reveal a distinct yet underrepresented knowledge system. In this section, we interpret the results in light of global research trends, highlighting contextual distinctiveness, structural imbalances, and epistemological challenges that differentiate Global South research from prevailing leadership paradigms.

Global Knowledge Asymmetries in Educational Leadership

Educational leadership research in the Global North, particularly in Anglo-American contexts like the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, has long been shaped by managerial, instructional, and transformational leadership models (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). These traditions emphasize

school performance, accountability, standardized testing, and data-driven decision-making, often within decentralized education systems that allow significant school-level autonomy. In contrast, Global South research reveals a more heterogeneous and contextualized understanding of leadership. While constructs such as *distributed* and *transformational leadership* are visible, their meanings and applications are frequently adapted to address issues such as resource scarcity, political centralization, and sociocultural complexity. For instance, “transformational leadership” in Ghana or Pakistan often involves moral authority, community engagement, or navigating power hierarchies, rather than purely instructional or data-centric goals (Oduro, 2004; Saeed et al., 2020). These findings suggest the contextual adaptation of existing leadership theories.

Although research from the Global South is often contextually rich and socially grounded, it remains structurally underrepresented in global citation systems. Much Southern scholarship is published in regional outlets or non-English languages, limiting its inclusion in major indexing databases. Linguistic barriers, restricted access to publishing networks, and editorial preferences for dominant methodological paradigms contribute to this imbalance, narrowing global knowledge exchange and constraining the visibility of alternative leadership perspectives.

Contextual Specificities of Leadership in the Global South

A key insight from the review is the role of structural and political contexts in shaping leadership practice. Many Global South countries operate within highly centralized educational systems, where principals and school leaders often serve as administrative agents rather than instructional leaders (Bush & Glover, 2016). Leadership is frequently constrained by bureaucratic rigidity, top-down mandates, and limited discretion in areas such as curriculum design, budget allocation, or staffing. Moreover, the impact of political instability, corruption, and conflict is more pronounced in many Southern contexts. For example, studies from Nigeria and South Sudan highlight how school leadership is shaped by insecurity, displacement, and ethnic tensions, requiring leaders to act as mediators and community stabilizers (Chikoko, 2008; Alhawsawi & Alshammari, 2022). Similarly, in rural Latin America or post-conflict regions like Sri Lanka, leadership often entails negotiating peacebuilding, healing trauma, and rebuilding trust, roles rarely acknowledged in dominant leadership models.

Resource constraints expand leadership roles beyond instructional guidance to include infrastructure management, welfare coordination, and resource mobilization, particularly in low-income settings. These multi-dimensional responsibilities reflect an expanded conception of leadership grounded in social justice, equity, and resilience rather than solely academic outcomes.

Epistemological Challenges and Conceptual Diversity

A key insight emerging from this study concerns the epistemological tension between universalized leadership frameworks and culturally grounded interpretations of authority and legitimacy. Evidence from the Global South suggests that leadership is frequently embedded in relational, moral, and community-based value systems rather than purely managerial logics. For instance, *Ubuntu*-informed leadership in South Africa emphasizes collective

humanity, reciprocity, and relational accountability (Naicker et al., 2016). Similarly, Indigenous leadership discourses in Latin America foreground holistic education, ecological wisdom, and intergenerational responsibility as central to educational governance (Cajete, 2000). These perspectives expand prevailing leadership theory by repositioning legitimacy as socially embedded and culturally mediated, underscoring the need for more pluralistic and context-sensitive conceptual frameworks within the field.

South-South Collaborations and the Northern Hegemony

The bibliometric network analysis indicates emerging South–South collaborations, particularly among India, South Africa, Nigeria, and Brazil, reflecting a gradual strengthening of regional research ecosystems. However, cross-national research remains heavily structured through North–South partnerships, which continue to shape research agendas and visibility patterns. While such collaborations provide important resources and global platforms, future partnerships should move beyond asymmetric models toward equitable authorship, shared agenda-setting, and sustained local research capacity. Strengthening horizontal networks within the Global South may be essential for building autonomous and context-responsive knowledge production in educational leadership.

Limitations

While this study offers a comprehensive mapping of educational leadership research in the Global South, several methodological and structural limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, although justified by their indexing standards and compatibility with bibliometric tools, may have resulted in the exclusion of relevant research published in regional or non-indexed journals. This is particularly significant in contexts such as Latin America, Francophone Africa, and parts of the Middle East, where locally influential research often circulates outside major international databases. The decision to include only English-language publications further shapes the contours of the dataset. Important contributions published in Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, or French are likely underrepresented, inadvertently reproducing some of the epistemic asymmetries that this study seeks to critique. As such, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting the English-indexed segment of Global South research rather than its full intellectual landscape. Additionally, bibliometric analyses are inherently dependent on the accuracy of citation metadata and indexing practices. Emerging research communities and newer journals may receive lower citation visibility, not due to limited scholarly merit but because of structural indexing disparities. This dynamic may influence patterns of citation impact and perceived prominence within the field.

The predominance of qualitative methodologies within the thematic sample limits the extent to which findings can be generalized across diverse educational systems. While qualitative approaches provide rich contextual insight, broader comparative and longitudinal quantitative studies would strengthen the cumulative evidence base. Future research that incorporates multilingual databases, regional indexing systems, and mixed-method or longitudinal designs would help address these limitations and deepen the global inclusivity of educational leadership research.

Conclusion

This study offered a comprehensive exploration of the trends, thematic patterns, and epistemological dynamics within educational leadership research emerging from the Global South. Through a combination of bibliometric mapping and systematic literature review, we identified a growing but uneven body of research characterized by regional disparities, methodological preferences, and conceptual adaptations of global leadership models. The bibliometric analysis revealed an increasing volume of publications over the last two decades, particularly from countries such as India, Nigeria, South Africa, and Brazil. However, visibility remains a concern, with limited representation in top-tier journals and minimal citation of Global South research in international discourse. The thematic synthesis highlighted a strong focus on leadership preparation, distributed leadership, equity, and contextual governance. Yet, several critical areas, such as digital leadership, crisis response, and gendered leadership, remain underexplored, especially in post-conflict, rural, and marginalized settings. These findings reaffirm the urgent need to decentralize the production of knowledge in educational leadership. A more inclusive approach requires valuing indigenous leadership frameworks, diversifying research methods, and dismantling structural barriers to publishing and participation in global academic networks. Moving forward, the field must embrace a context-responsive research agenda that prioritizes relevance over replication. This includes supporting South–South scholarly networks, investing in leadership development that reflects local needs, and ensuring policy and practice are informed by research that speaks to the real challenges of leadership in the Global South. By doing so, the global discourse on educational leadership can be made not only more equitable but also more robust, diverse, and impactful.

Statements and Declarations

Author Contribution Statement: Both authors contributed substantially to the conception, design, and execution of this study. Shahid Rafiq led the study design, conducted the bibliometric analysis, and drafted the initial manuscript. Ayesha Afzal contributed to the systematic literature review, data interpretation, and critical revisions of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version for submission.

Acknowledgment: The authors express their sincere gratitude to their respective institutions for providing academic support throughout this research. They also thank the teams at Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC databases for maintaining accessible scholarly repositories that were essential for the data collection phase of this study.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, related to the content or publication of this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement: The bibliometric and literature review data analyzed in this study were obtained from Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC. Processed datasets and coding outputs supporting the findings of this research are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Funding Statement: This research did not receive any specific grant or financial support from public, commercial, or non-profit funding agencies. The study was fully self-funded by the authors.

Ethical Approval Statement: This study did not involve human subjects or animals, and no personal or sensitive data were used. As all data sources are publicly accessible academic databases, formal ethical approval was not required.

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