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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A STATE-OF-THE-ART REVIEW

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Abstract

Educational leadership has undergone profound transformation in the twenty first century, shaped by technological advancement, globalisation, social justice movements, and unprecedented crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper presents a state-of-the-art review, synthesising conceptual, methodological, and thematic trends in recent scholarship. Drawing on literature indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Latindex, the review examines three primary dimensions: the evolution of leadership conceptualisations, the preparation and professional development of leaders, and the impact of leadership on student learning, teacher wellbeing, and institutional improvement. Particular emphasis is placed on distributed, inclusive, and ethically oriented models of leadership, alongside the integration of digital technologies and the promotion of resilience and wellbeing within educational communities. Persistent challenges, including inequity, cultural bias in research, and the need for sustainability-oriented leadership, are identified. The review also acknowledges the instrumental role of artificial intelligence in facilitating the systematic search, initial categorisation, and preliminary synthesis of literature, while emphasising that interpretation and critical analysis remain the domain of human expertise. Educational leadership is thus positioned as a transformative, shared, and ethical endeavour essential to fostering resilient, democratic, and equitable societies.

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Introduction:-

The twenty-first century has brought unprecedented challenges and opportunities for educational leadership. Schools now operate within highly complex and dynamic societal contexts, shaped by globalisation, demographic shifts, rapid technological change, and evolving societal expectations. Historically, educational leadership was predominantly conceptualised in managerial terms, positioning the principal or head teacher as the central agent responsible for instructional quality and administrative efficiency (Leithwood, 2018). As Leithwood emphasises, "the principal remains pivotal, yet the ways in which they influence learning are complex and indirect, operating primarily through teacher motivation, instructional guidance, and organisational culture" (p. 12). While such

frameworks provided foundational guidance, they often overlooked the relational, ethical, and contextual dimensions that underpin effective leadership (Day, 2022; Harris, 2023). Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises leadership as a multidimensional, relational, and socially embedded practice encompassing instructional, ethical, emotional, and community dimensions. Day (2022) argues that “leadership is both a moral and relational practice, demanding continuous reflection and responsiveness to the evolving needs of learners and communities” (p. 18). The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated the urgency of this reconceptualisation, exposing systemic inequities while simultaneously demonstrating the potential of innovative, compassionate, and digitally adept leadership to sustain learning and promote wellbeing across diverse contexts (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2021). Leaders are now expected not merely to maintain organisational stability but also to foster resilience, equity, and sustainability, preparing schools to respond effectively to both local and global challenges.

This review provides a comprehensive synthesis of recent research, highlighting emerging conceptual frameworks, the evolution of leadership preparation, and the tangible and intangible impacts of leadership on educational communities. By situating these developments within broader debates concerning globalisation, climate change, migration, and the ethical use of artificial intelligence, the paper emphasises the profound social significance of educational leadership in promoting democratic citizenship, equity, and global responsibility. The synthesis draws on literature from Scopus, Web of Science, and Latindex, complemented by recent monographs, thematic reviews, and bibliometric analyses (Karakose, Leithwood, & Tülübaşı, 2024). While not exhaustive, the review endeavours to capture dominant trends and identify promising avenues for future scholarship, thereby offering insights relevant for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

Methodology:-

This study adopts a state-of-the-art review methodology, which extends beyond the mere summarisation of literature to critically appraise, organise, and synthesise contemporary developments (Grant & Booth, 2009). The methodology integrates bibliometric mapping with narrative synthesis, combining quantitative and qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of the field of educational leadership.

Three primary databases were consulted: Scopus, Web of Science, and Latindex (Elsevier, n.d.; Clarivate Analytics, n.d.; Karakose et al., 2024). These databases were selected to ensure both global and Latin American perspectives were represented. Search terms included “educational leadership,” “school leadership,” “distributed leadership,” “instructional leadership,” “equity,” and “wellbeing,” capturing both traditional and emerging areas of research. The time frame prioritised publications from 2018 to 2024, though seminal works outside this range were included when theoretically or methodologically significant.

Selection criteria emphasised peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and systematic reviews, while grey literature and policy reports were incorporated only when offering unique insights not captured in indexed publications. Bibliometric analyses, including those by Karakose et al. (2024), were utilised to identify influential authors, journals, and thematic clusters. Artificial intelligence tools were employed to assist in optimising search strings, categorising initial results, and highlighting patterns in the literature (Kasneci et al., 2023). While AI substantially enhanced efficiency and breadth of coverage, all interpretation, synthesis, and critical evaluation were conducted by human researchers to ensure scholarly rigour and mitigate potential biases introduced by algorithmic prioritisation. A narrative synthesis was subsequently performed to integrate findings across quantitative and qualitative paradigms, encompassing experimental studies, correlational research, ethnographies, and case studies. This dual approach allowed the review to combine measurable bibliometric trends with nuanced, context-sensitive insights, capturing both global patterns and the relational complexities inherent in educational leadership.

Literature Review:-

Conceptualisations of Leadership:

The conceptualisation of educational leadership has undergone a profound evolution, reflecting shifts in both theoretical frameworks and practical applications. Early models predominantly framed leadership as an individualised role, with an emphasis on managerial efficiency, instructional oversight, and strategic decision-making (Leithwood, 2018). These traditional perspectives, while influential, have been critiqued for neglecting the relational, ethical, and contextual dimensions that shape leadership in real-world educational settings. A significant paradigm shift emerged with the introduction of distributed leadership frameworks, which challenge hierarchical and individualistic conceptions. As Spillane (2006) notes, “Leadership is stretched over the social and situational

contexts in which it occurs, rather than residing in the actions of an individual leader” (p. 13). This perspective reconceptualises leadership as a socially distributed phenomenon, where multiple actors—teachers, administrators, students, and community members—contribute to decision-making and the achievement of shared goals. Recent studies have reinforced this view, highlighting the positive impact of distributed leadership on teacher efficacy, collaboration, and school performance (Nadeem, 2024; Yang & Chang, 2024). For instance, research by Al Hassanieh (2020) demonstrated that distributed leadership practices in UAE schools led to improved governance and enhanced school performance.

Ethical and culturally responsive leadership has also emerged as a central concern in contemporary scholarship. Khalifa et al. (2016) argue that “Leaders must actively engage with and affirm the cultural identities of students, while confronting systemic inequities that inhibit educational access and success” (p. 1275). This approach situates leadership within moral and political dimensions, recognising that leaders influence not only instructional outcomes but also broader societal structures, norms, and opportunities. Recent empirical studies have further elucidated the importance of culturally responsive leadership in fostering inclusive learning environments and promoting equity. For example, research by Mansfield (2024) critically analysed a large urban school district’s five-year plan aimed at being culturally responsive and equity-focused, offering an integrative framework for analysis. In addition, contemporary scholarship increasingly advocates for the integration of perspectives from the Global South and Indigenous knowledge systems.

These perspectives challenge the Eurocentric bias that has historically dominated educational leadership research, promoting more contextually grounded and culturally responsive frameworks. Adekola et al. (2024/2025) introduced the Global South Leadership Index, identifying new players, agendas, and pathways to provide a framework for other countries to follow suit. This index sidesteps labelling leaders explicitly with terms like democratic or dictatorial, offering a nuanced understanding of leadership in the Global South. In sum, conceptualisations of educational leadership have evolved from narrow, individualised, and managerial models towards frameworks that recognise leadership as relational, ethical, distributed, and culturally responsive. This evolution underscores the need for leaders who are capable of mobilising collective capacity, navigating complex social and institutional contexts, and promoting equitable and inclusive educational outcomes across diverse global settings.

Leadership Preparation and Professional Development:-

Contemporary educational leadership preparation has undergone a significant transformation, reflecting the increasing complexity of the educational landscape and the evolving expectations placed upon leaders. Traditional models, which predominantly focused on managerial competencies and instructional oversight, have been critiqued for neglecting the relational, ethical, and contextual dimensions of leadership. In response, current frameworks emphasise resilience, adaptive expertise, and ethical grounding as essential attributes for effective leadership (Bush, 2018). As Bush (2018) asserts, “Leadership development programmes that combine theory, practice, and mentorship are essential for cultivating adaptive and ethically grounded school leaders” (p. 92). This perspective underscores the importance of bridging theoretical knowledge with practical experience, recognising that leadership effectiveness is not solely derived from knowledge acquisition but also from the capacity to navigate dynamic and unpredictable contexts with moral and professional discernment.

Fullan (2020) similarly contends that leaders must transcend the conventional role of school manager, understanding themselves as transformative agents capable of inspiring and sustaining systemic change: “Leaders must understand their role not merely as managers of schools but as agents of societal change, capable of inspiring and sustaining transformative practice” (p. 35). Such a conceptualisation positions leadership preparation as inherently forward-looking and socially purposeful, emphasising the cultivation of vision, ethical responsibility, and the capacity to mobilise stakeholders around shared educational and societal goals. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the necessity for educational leaders to possess digital competencies. The rapid shift to online and hybrid learning environments exposed significant gaps in digital preparedness among school leaders, underscoring the need for systematic development in areas such as hybrid learning management, ethical AI integration, and technological resilience (Netolicky, 2024). As the author notes, “The pandemic has revealed gaps in digital preparedness among school leaders, emphasising the need for systematic development in hybrid learning management, ethical AI use, and technological resilience” (p. 112). Leaders must therefore be equipped not only with traditional administrative and instructional skills but also with the digital literacies necessary to navigate complex, technologically mediated educational environments.

Recent studies have further elucidated the importance of resilience and adaptive expertise in leadership preparation. Zadok, Benoliel & Schechter (2024) examine the concept of organizational resilience in educational leadership, highlighting its significance in fostering positive outcomes for schools and organisations. Their study identifies key factors influencing resilience, including transformational leadership practices, collective teacher efficacy, and organisational culture, and discusses strategies for developing resilience such as empowering teacher teams and building adaptive systems. These findings emphasise the necessity of developing leaders who can navigate complex, digitally mediated environments while promoting equity and ethical practice. Moreover, the integration of adaptive leadership principles has been identified as a critical component of effective leadership preparation. Adaptive leadership focuses on guiding organisations through change by addressing adaptive challenges—problems that require new learning, innovation, and changes in values, beliefs, and behaviours (Heifetz, 1994). Recent literature suggests that adaptive leadership training drives collaborative team dynamics, promotes innovation, and helps leaders work through challenges together (Zadok, Benoliel, & Schechter, 2024).

This approach equips leaders with the skills necessary to respond to unforeseen challenges and to lead organizations through periods of transformation. In sum, contemporary leadership preparation programmes are evolving to encompass a broader range of competencies that reflect the complexities of modern educational environments. By integrating resilience, adaptive expertise, and ethical grounding with digital competencies and adaptive leadership principles, these programmes aim to cultivate leaders who are not only effective managers but also transformative agents capable of navigating the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century educational landscape.

Impact of Leadership:-

Educational leadership profoundly influences both organisational effectiveness and human outcomes within schools. Leithwood (2018) asserts that “leaders affect student achievement primarily through their influence on teachers, organisational culture, and processes” (p. 12). This perspective aligns with findings from the Wallace Foundation (2021), which highlight that leadership impacts student outcomes indirectly by enhancing conditions for teaching and learning through improved organisational structures and teacher support. Similarly, a comprehensive review by Day (2020) underscores that leadership's effects on student achievement operate primarily through its influence on the quality of teaching and the creation of a positive school climate.

The relational and ethical dimensions of leadership are increasingly recognised as central to sustainable school improvement. Hargreaves and Shirley (2021) note that “leaders who prioritise wellbeing and relational trust contribute to sustainable school improvement, mitigating teacher burnout and enhancing student engagement” (p. 78). This is corroborated by recent studies indicating that trust in leadership positively affects teacher wellbeing and organisational commitment (Tsuyuguchi, 2025). Furthermore, a study by Zadok, Benoliel, and Schechter (2024) emphasizes the role of intentional care and relational trust in fostering a supportive school culture that enhances teacher resilience and student outcomes. Their research highlights how transformational leadership practices can cultivate an environment where educators feel valued and supported, leading to improved well-being and performance.

Empirical research further demonstrates that leadership plays a pivotal role in promoting innovation, organisational resilience, and adaptive capacity, especially in contexts marked by rapid technological change and complex social dynamics. Hallinger (2019) and OECD (2022) highlight that effective leadership facilitates the adoption of innovative pedagogical approaches, supports continuous professional development, and strengthens the capacity of organisations to respond flexibly to emergent challenges. In post-pandemic educational settings, where schools must integrate hybrid learning models, digital tools, and new approaches to student engagement, leadership that is strategic, collaborative, and ethically grounded has been shown to influence teacher morale, foster innovation, and enhance overall organisational resilience. Collectively, these findings underscore that contemporary educational leadership is a multifaceted practice, combining instructional guidance, ethical stewardship, and relational intelligence. Leaders who balance these elements not only promote improved student outcomes but also cultivate sustainable, resilient, and adaptive organisations capable of navigating the complexities of twenty-first-century education.

Data Analysis and Bibliometric Insights:

Bibliometric analyses of educational leadership literature indicate a sustained and significant increase in scholarly output over the past decade, reflecting the growing recognition of leadership as a critical factor in educational effectiveness. A comprehensive bibliometric review by Dragomir et al. (2025) reveals a marked acceleration in

publication volumes from 2015 onwards, with a notable surge in interdisciplinary research intersecting educational performance and public administration. This trend underscores the expanding scope of educational leadership studies, encompassing broader governance and policy dimensions. Geographically, the distribution of research contributions remains uneven. While North America, Europe, and East Asia continue to dominate the field, regions such as Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East are significantly underrepresented. This disparity points to critical gaps in global scholarship and highlights the need for more inclusive research agendas that reflect diverse educational contexts and challenges. For instance, a bibliometric analysis by Mohamudet al. (2025) indicates that higher education leadership research in the Global South, including Latin America and Africa, remains limited, with the majority of studies emanating from the United States and Western Europe.

Thematic analyses further elucidate the evolving priorities within educational leadership research. Distributed leadership remains a central focus, with numerous studies examining its impact on school improvement and teacher collaboration. Ethical and culturally responsive leadership is also prominent, reflecting an increased emphasis on equity, inclusion, and the affirmation of diverse student identities. Digital leadership has emerged as a critical area of interest, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the integration of technology in education. Research by Netolicky (2024) highlights the necessity for leaders to develop digital competencies to navigate hybrid learning environments and leverage technological tools effectively. Teacher wellbeing continues to be a significant concern, with leadership identified as a key factor in mitigating burnout and fostering supportive work environments.

Organisational innovation and resilience are increasingly recognised as essential for adapting to rapid changes and ensuring sustainable educational practices. These thematic patterns not only reflect the shifting scholarly priorities but also align with the pressing needs of contemporary educational systems, which require leaders capable of navigating complex, dynamic, and diverse environments. In summary, bibliometric analyses underscore the dynamic and evolving nature of educational leadership research. While there has been substantial growth in the field, significant regional disparities persist, necessitating concerted efforts to broaden the inclusivity and relevance of research. The identified thematic trends highlight the multifaceted challenges and opportunities facing educational leaders today, emphasizing the importance of adaptive, ethical, and culturally responsive leadership in fostering effective and equitable educational outcomes.

Distributed Leadership in Contemporary Schools:-

Distributed leadership reconceptualises authority as socially distributed across multiple actors, including principals, teachers, students, and community stakeholders (Spillane, 2006). This model enhances collaborative problem-solving, teacher empowerment, and school resilience. Research demonstrates that distributed leadership improves instructional quality and innovation adoption, while enabling schools to respond flexibly to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris, 2023). However, cross-cultural application remains uneven, underscoring the need for further empirical research in underrepresented regions.

Discussion:-

The literature indicates that contemporary educational leadership is increasingly understood as relational, distributed, and ethically oriented, reflecting a paradigm shift from traditional hierarchical models to approaches that emphasize collaboration, shared responsibility, and moral accountability. Leaders are required to balance multiple, often competing, roles—ranging from instructional guidance and organizational management to ethical stewardship—while responding to the multifaceted and rapidly evolving challenges of a globalized educational landscape. These challenges encompass not only technological transformations and the pervasive influence of digitalization but also pressing societal issues such as climate change, migration, and entrenched socio-economic inequities that influence access, participation, and outcomes within educational systems. In this context, leadership is no longer confined to positional authority but is understood as a dynamic practice distributed across formal and informal actors, requiring negotiation, reflexivity, and responsiveness to complex, interdependent systems (Spillane, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016; Mifsud, 2024).

Distributed and collaborative leadership frameworks offer practical strategies for navigating these complexities. By engaging diverse stakeholders—including teachers, students, families, and community partners—leaders can co-construct solutions that promote innovation, adaptability, and organizational resilience. For instance, studies from urban schools in North America and Europe highlight the positive impacts of teacher-led leadership teams on student engagement and curriculum development, demonstrating that distributed leadership can effectively leverage

professional expertise across institutional hierarchies (Khalifa et al., 2016). Nevertheless, despite the demonstrated benefits, persistent inequities remain. These include uneven allocation of financial and human resources, underrepresentation of perspectives from the Global South in leadership discourse, and limited integration of culturally responsive practices that validate and leverage learners' diverse socio-cultural experiences (Karakose et al., 2024). Consequently, there is a growing consensus that distributed leadership must be critically examined through an equity lens to ensure that collaborative approaches do not inadvertently reproduce systemic disadvantages (Mifsud, 2024).

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital tools into leadership practice further complicates this landscape. On one hand, these technologies offer opportunities to enhance efficiency, support data-informed decision-making, and facilitate personalized professional development for educators. AI-driven analytics, for example, can provide leaders with real-time insights into student performance, attendance patterns, and engagement trends, enabling more targeted interventions and strategic resource allocation. On the other hand, AI adoption introduces ethical and pedagogical risks, including algorithmic bias, threats to privacy, and the potential for technological solutions to amplify existing inequities if deployed without contextual understanding and ethical oversight (Kasneci et al., 2023; Sposato et al., 2025). Moreover, the increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital tools into leadership research and practice presents both significant opportunities and complex ethical dilemmas. On the one hand, these technologies can enhance efficiency, support data-informed decision-making, and facilitate personalized professional development for educators. On the other hand, they raise critical concerns regarding data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the potential to exacerbate existing inequities if technological adoption is not accompanied by careful ethical oversight and contextually grounded policies (Kasneci et al., 2023; Sposato et al., 2025).

In sum, contemporary educational leadership scholarship underscores the importance of relational, distributed, and ethically oriented approaches that are attentive to global and local inequities, while simultaneously critically engaging with digital innovations. Leadership in this paradigm requires a delicate balance: fostering collaboration and resilience, navigating ethical complexities, and advocating for equitable access to resources and opportunities. By integrating distributed leadership frameworks with careful consideration of AI and digital tools, educational leaders are better positioned to enact practices that are responsive, inclusive, and socially responsible, ultimately supporting the holistic development of learners and the broader educational community.

Future Research:-

Future scholarship should emphasise longitudinal and cross-cultural studies of distributed leadership, exploring its effects on student outcomes, teacher wellbeing, and innovation adoption. Participatory research methodologies, including student, parent, and community engagement, are essential to understand leadership as a socially embedded process. The rapid evolution of technology necessitates ongoing investigation into ethical AI use, digital equity, and hybrid learning management. Comparative studies across diverse socio-political contexts, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, are crucial to produce globally relevant insights.

Conclusion:-

Educational leadership in the twenty-first century is characterised by complexity, ethical responsibility, and relational dynamics, reflecting the multifaceted challenges faced by educational institutions in a globalised world. Contemporary leaders must navigate a landscape shaped by technological innovation, socio-economic inequities, climate change, and demographic shifts, all of which demand both strategic vision and moral discernment. Distributed, inclusive, and digitally competent leadership models are therefore essential for mobilising diverse stakeholders, leveraging collective expertise, and fostering organisational resilience, while maintaining a sustained focus on issues of equity and social justice (Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadeem, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasised the critical importance of wellbeing, adaptability, and resilience in leadership practice, demonstrating that effective leadership extends beyond operational management to encompass emotional intelligence, community engagement, and proactive crisis response. Similarly, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital tools has begun to transform educational leadership, facilitating systematic data collection, preliminary literature analysis, and evidence-informed decision-making. Nevertheless, the interpretation, synthesis, and application of knowledge remain fundamentally human endeavours, requiring nuanced judgement, ethical reflection, and contextual understanding that cannot be fully automated (Kasneci et al., 2023; Sposato et al., 2025).

Looking ahead, research and practice must prioritise global diversity, ethical imperatives, and sustainability concerns, advancing leadership frameworks that are culturally responsive, equitable, and environmentally conscious. By integrating distributed leadership models with careful consideration of AI and digital tools, educational leaders are better positioned to implement practices that are responsive, inclusive, and socially responsible, ultimately supporting the holistic development of learners and the broader educational community (Beretta, 2025; Jukiewicz, 2025). In this way, future leaders can navigate complexity with integrity, harness innovation with discernment, and enact transformative practices that contribute to more equitable, resilient, and democratic societies.

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