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# Mapping the Evolution of Educational Leadership Toward the Adaptive Digital-Inclusive Leadership (ADIL) Integration Framework

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**ABSTRACT**

Educational leadership scholarship has expanded across transformational, instructional, distributed, servant, digital, inclusive, and adaptive traditions, yet the relationships among these paradigms remain theoretically fragmented. This study examines their intellectual evolution and emerging patterns of integration through an integrated Bibliometric–Systematic Literature Review (B-SLR). A corpus of 3,509 Scopus-indexed journal articles published between 1969 and 2025 was analyzed using VOSviewer and Biblioshiny to map publication patterns, citation structures, and thematic development. A focused subset of 156 influential studies was subsequently synthesized qualitatively to examine theoretical relationships across leadership paradigms. The findings indicate increasing thematic and intellectual interconnectedness among previously differentiated leadership traditions and identify four recurring forms of integration: complementary integration, layered integration, contextual hybridization, and mechanistic deepening. Based on these patterns, the study proposes the Adaptive Digital-Inclusive Leadership (ADIL) framework, comprising an Ethical–Transformational Core, Distributed–Digital Mediation, and Contextual–Adaptive Regulation. ADIL is presented as an evidence-informed conceptual synthesis rather than an empirically validated leadership model. The study contributes to educational leadership theory by articulating an emerging post-paradigmatic orientation, methodologically by demonstrating the integrative potential of B-SLR, and practically by providing a framework for future leadership development and empirical investigation. Further research is required to operationalize and validate ADIL across educational and sociocultural contexts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, educational leadership has mirrored shifting understandings of what it means to guide human development in complex situation. The field has moved from mechanistic, trait-based

models toward more nuanced frameworks that recognize leadership as a human practice, in contextually responsive, relational, and value-laden (Almutairi et al., 2025; Spillane & Healey, 2010). Contemporary educational institutions now face challenges that extend beyond managerial adaptation: they demand leaders capable of interpreting uncertainty, balancing competing values, and sustaining human connection amid systemic transformation (Bagwell, 2020; Fernandes et al., 2023). The convergence of technological disruption (Berkovich & Hassan, 2025), demographic diversification (Aboramadan et al., 2022a; Kanya & Johan, 2025), accountability pressures (Kwan, 2020), and persistent inequities (Brown et al., 2022; Guvhu, 2025), compounded by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Gigliotti & Alvarez-Robinson, 2025), has underscored the inadequacy of technocratic leadership models and the need for approaches that are ethically grounded, emotionally intelligent, and context-sensitive.

The evolution of leadership theory itself mirrors these changing educational realities. Early twentieth-century research, grounded in positivist assumptions, sought universal traits and behaviors (Ghafar et al., 2025) were reflecting an industrial ethos of certainty and replicability. As complexity grew, contingency and situational theories reconceptualized leadership as contextually enacted rather than formulaic (del Arco et al., 2025; Nonaillada & Martin, 2022). Transformational leadership reintroduced the moral and affective dimensions of leadership which has capacity to inspire and elevate human potential (Berkovich & Hassan, 2025; Kwan, 2020; Nurabadi et al., 2022), while servant leadership deepened this ethical turn, reframing leadership as a commitment to serve and empower others (Aboramadan et al., 2021; Clarence et al., 2021; Doğan, 2025; He & Guo, 2025). Building on this humanization, distributed leadership reframed authority as a collective, socially constructed process emerging through interaction rather than hierarchy (Neumerski et al., 2018; Spillane, 2005), and instructional leadership sustained a moral focus on teaching and learning as the heart of effective practice (Kwan, 2020; Nurabadi et al., 2022; Pelliceer, 1982). Collectively, these paradigms mark a gradual humanization of leadership thought: from control to care, from authority to authenticity.

As educational leadership entered the twenty-first century, sustaining this theoretical balance became increasingly difficult amid rapid systemic change. Digital transformation has redefined how teaching, learning, and administration intersect, demanding not only technological competence but also new relational sensibilities in virtual environments (Caneva et al., 2023; Tongli et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed critical vulnerabilities in leaders' preparedness for ambiguity and crisis (Fernandes et al., 2023; Safwan et al., 2025), yet also illuminated the moral strength of resilient leadership grounded in empathy and adaptability (Chance, 2022; G. Wang & Bai, 2025). Meanwhile, increasing demographic diversity has heightened the imperative for inclusive leadership that nurtures belonging and cultural responsiveness (Aboramadan et al., 2022; Bhuttah et al., 2024; K. A. Dahleez et al., 2023), while the urgency of environmental sustainability invites educators to integrate ecological consciousness into institutional missions (Asad et al., 2024; Xing et al., 2024). Evidence further shows that servant and resilient leadership foster teacher well-being, psychological capital, and thriving (Mustamil & Najam, 2020; Winarno et al., 2025), signaling a paradigm shift from performance-based effectiveness toward the cultivation of humane, sustainable organizational life (Aboramadan et al., 2020). Together, these forces redefine leadership effectiveness not as technical mastery but as a deeply human response to complexity.

Yet despite this intellectual expansion, educational leadership scholarship remains critically fragmented. Researchers and practitioners operate within theoretical silos, such as transformational, distributed, instructional, and servant leadership, without sufficient dialogue across paradigms (Kwan, 2020), restricting the field's capacity to theorize leadership as a living, multidimensional practice. Persistent geographic asymmetry continues to privilege Anglo-American contexts while marginalizing non-Western perspectives (Hariri et al., 2016), constraining epistemic diversity. Methodologically, mixed-methods designs remain underused, and few bibliometric studies have mapped the field's intellectual structure and thematic evolution—leaving critical questions about paradigmatic trajectories unanswered (Ishak et al., 2024; Jutzi et al., 2025). Integrative attempts connecting transformational–instructional, servant–distributed, and inclusive–adaptive perspectives have provided important foundations for understanding cross-paradigm relationships in educational leadership. However, these efforts remain

largely focused on specific paradigm combinations or bounded institutional contexts, leaving limited understanding of how multiple established and emerging leadership paradigms have converged across the broader intellectual development of the field. Existing reviews have also tended to examine particular leadership traditions independently, making it difficult to determine whether contemporary educational leadership represents the coexistence of multiple paradigms or an emerging pattern of theoretical integration. To address this gap, the present study combines large-scale bibliometric mapping with systematic qualitative synthesis to examine the intellectual relationships among established and emerging educational leadership paradigms and to develop an integrative framework grounded in their documented patterns of convergence.

Grounded in a constructivist understanding of leadership as socially enacted practice, this study employs a Bibliometric-Systematic Literature Review (B-SLR) to advance theoretical and empirical insight into educational leadership as an evolving discipline. Drawing on 3,509 Scopus-indexed articles published between 1969 and 2025, the study addresses three interrelated research questions:

RQ1. How has educational leadership scholarship evolved in terms of publication growth, influential sources, citation structures, and geographical collaboration?

RQ2. How have the conceptual structure and dominant themes of educational leadership evolved across different periods?

RQ3. How have established and emerging educational leadership paradigms converged over time, and what integrative mechanisms can be derived from these patterns to inform a contemporary leadership framework?

The study makes three interrelated contributions. Theoretically, it examines whether the intellectual development of educational leadership reflects an emerging shift from relatively discrete paradigms toward a more integrative, post-paradigmatic orientation and, based on this synthesis, proposes the Adaptive Digital-Inclusive Leadership (ADIL) framework. Methodologically, it applies an integrated Bibliometric–Systematic Literature Review (B-SLR) design that combines large-scale intellectual mapping with focused qualitative synthesis. Practically, it translates the resulting framework into a conceptual basis for leadership development, institutional reflection, and future empirical investigation in educational settings.

## 2. METHODS

### *2.1 Research Design*

This study employed an integrated Bibliometric–Systematic Literature Review (B-SLR) design to examine both the intellectual structure and theoretical development of educational leadership scholarship. The design consisted of three analytically connected phases. Phase I used bibliometric analysis to map publication patterns, citation structures, scholarly networks, and thematic development across the field. Phase II employed systematic qualitative synthesis to examine the theoretical relationships among major leadership paradigms represented within the corpus. Phase III integrated evidence from the bibliometric and qualitative analyses to derive the conceptual architecture of the Adaptive Digital-Inclusive Leadership (ADIL) framework.

This staged design enabled the study to combine the breadth of large-scale bibliometric mapping with the interpretive depth of systematic theoretical synthesis. Rather than treating bibliometric and qualitative analyses as independent procedures, findings from the first phase informed the selection and interpretation of influential studies in the subsequent synthesis, while the final integration phase examined recurring cross-paradigm relationships as the conceptual basis for the proposed framework. The overall procedure was informed by the B-SLR approach described by Marzi et al. (2025).

### *2.2 Data Source*

Scopus was selected as the primary bibliographic database because of its broad coverage of peer-reviewed literature in education, social sciences, psychology, and management, as well as its

compatibility with established bibliometric analysis tools. Scopus also provides structured bibliographic metadata, including citation information, author affiliations, keywords, and source information, which can be exported for analysis using VOSviewer and Biblioshiny. The use of a single database further ensured consistency in metadata structure throughout the bibliometric workflow. This choice was aligned with established practices in bibliometric and B-SLR research (Marzi et al., 2025).

The timeframe 1969-2025 was selected for two reasons. The lower bound of 1969 corresponds to the earliest educational leadership articles indexed in Scopus, coinciding with the emergence of systematic educational administration scholarship. The upper bound of 2025 ensures the study captures the most recent paradigmatic shifts, including digital, inclusive, and post-pandemic adaptive leadership discourse to provide a complete 56-year longitudinal window for bibliometric analysis.

### *2.3 Search Strategy*

This study employed four paradigm-stratified search strings in Scopus to ensure comprehensive coverage of all major educational leadership traditions—from classical paradigms (contingency, transformational, servant) to emerging ones (digital, green, adaptive, inclusive) without the under-retrieval risk of a single broad query (Marzi et al., 2025). Within each query, Boolean operators (AND/OR) were applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords restricted to educational contexts (*"education," "school," "teacher," "principal," "university"*). All four queries applied identical Scopus interface filters: peer-reviewed English-language journal articles at final publication stage, restricted to relevant subject areas (Social Sciences, Psychology, Business/Management, Arts and Humanities, Decision Sciences, Multidisciplinary). The four paradigm clusters and their search strings were as follows:

**Query 1 — Transformational and Servant Leadership**

(TITLE-ABS-KEY("transformational leadership" OR "servant leadership") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("education" OR "school" OR "teacher" OR "principal" OR "university")) AND (LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"ARTS") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"DECI") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"MULT")) AND LIMIT-TO(DOCTYPE,"ar") AND LIMIT-TO(PUBSTAGE,"final") AND LIMIT-TO(SRCTYPE,"j") AND LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE,"English")

**Query 2 — Distributed and Instructional Leadership**

(TITLE-ABS-KEY("distributed leadership" OR "instructional leadership") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("education" OR "school" OR "teacher" OR "principal" OR "university")) AND (LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"ARTS") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"MULT")) AND LIMIT-TO(DOCTYPE,"ar") AND LIMIT-TO(PUBSTAGE,"final") AND LIMIT-TO(SRCTYPE,"j") AND LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE,"English")

**Query 3 — Adaptive, Digital, Green, and Inclusive Leadership**

(TITLE-ABS-KEY("adaptive leadership" OR "digital leadership" OR "green leadership" OR "inclusive leadership") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("education" OR "school" OR "teacher" OR "principal" OR "university")) AND (LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"ARTS") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"DECI") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"MULT")) AND LIMIT-TO(DOCTYPE,"ar") AND LIMIT-TO(PUBSTAGE,"final") AND LIMIT-TO(SRCTYPE,"j") AND LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE,"English")

**Query 4 — Contingency, Situational, and Fiedler-Based Leadership**

(TITLE-ABS-KEY("fiedler theory" OR "contingency theory" OR "situational leadership") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("education" OR "school" OR "teacher" OR "principal" OR "university")) AND (LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"DECI") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"ARTS") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA,"MULT")) AND LIMIT-TO(DOCTYPE,"ar") AND LIMIT-TO(PUBSTAGE,"final") AND LIMIT-TO(SRCTYPE,"j") AND LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE,"English")

The four queries yielded a combined raw pool of n = 6,177 records. After applying Scopus interface filters (document type, source type, and language), 1,860 records were automatically excluded.

Following cross-query deduplication (8 duplicates removed), n = 4,309 records advanced to the title and abstract screening phase. Manual screening excluded 580 records that were clearly out of scope. Of the 3,729 reports sought for retrieval, 24 were inaccessible. The remaining 3,705 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, leading to the exclusion of 196 records (104 situated in non-educational contexts and 92 lacking explicit leadership theorization). Ultimately, the final corpus comprised n = 3,509 unique records retained for bibliometric analysis, from which a highly influential subset (n = 156) was extracted for qualitative synthesis. The full PRISMA 2020 selection flow is presented in Figure 1.

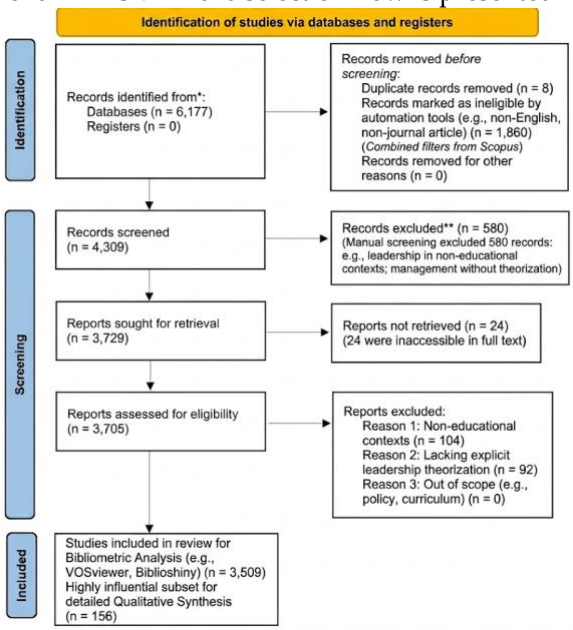



**Figure 1.** PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Educational Leadership Study (1969–2025)

### *2.4 Inclusion Criteria*

Studies were included if they: (1) were peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus and published in English; (2) explicitly addressed leadership theories, models, or practices within educational contexts; (3) reported outcomes related to leadership, organizational processes, or educational performance; and (4) were published between 1969 and 2025.

Studies were excluded if they addressed leadership in non-educational contexts (e.g., business, military, health, or student-led organizations); focused on management, policy, or curriculum without explicit leadership theorization; were non-peer-reviewed, non-English, conference papers, editorials, book chapters, or theses; were inaccessible in full text; or were identified as cross-query duplicate entries.

### *2.5 Data Analysis*

Bibliometric analyses were performed using VOSviewer (v1.6.19) and Biblioshiny (R-based Bibliometrix) with bibliographic coupling and keyword co-occurrence as aggregation criteria, consistent with B-SLR protocols (Marzi et al., 2025). Analyses examined co-authorship, co-citation, and thematic evolution across five temporal clusters (1969–2000, 2001–2010, 2011–2015, 2016–2020, 2021–2025).

The qualitative synthesis involved detailed coding of 156 most-influential articles by leadership paradigm, institutional context, and theoretical contribution. Cross-paradigm comparison and temporal mapping were used to identify patterns of continuity, divergence, and integration. To ensure analytical rigor, coding and inclusion decisions were verified through inter-reviewer triangulation, consistent with B-SLR validation procedure (Marzi et al., 2025).

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *3.1. Publication Trends and Source Productivity (RQ1)*

Annual publication data reveal an exponential growth trajectory in educational leadership research from 1969 to 2025 (Figure 2). Output was minimal before 1990, grew modestly through the 1990s, and escalated steeply after 2005, with the sharpest acceleration occurring from 2015 onward. This trajectory reflects the progressive institutionalization of educational leadership as a scholarly discipline and the concurrent broadening of its conceptual scope to incorporate psychological, digital, and inclusive leadership perspectives.

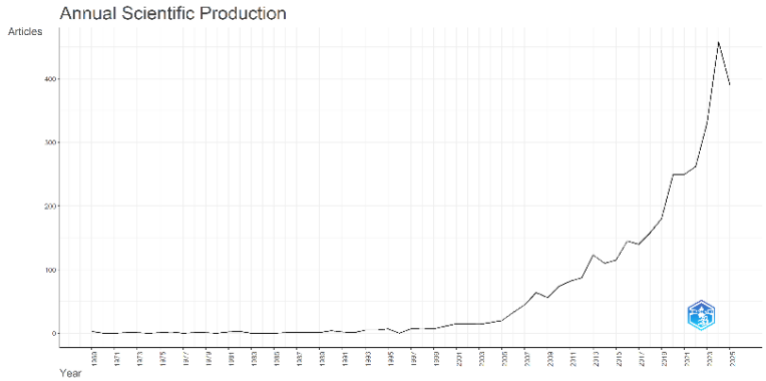



**Figure 2.** Annual Scientific Production in Educational Leadership (1969–2025)

Source analysis identifies ten dominant publication outlets accounting for approximately 20% of the total 3,509-article corpus (Figure 3). Educational Management Administration and Leadership leads in volume, followed by Journal of Educational Administration and Educational Administration Quarterly that have historically anchored the field's theoretical canon. Notably, Frontiers in Psychology and Frontiers in Education entered the top tier only after 2015, reflecting cross-disciplinary infusion from psychology and education technology. Cumulative production trajectories (Figure 4) confirm that established journals maintain steady linear growth while newer open-access outlets show steeper post-2015 acceleration.

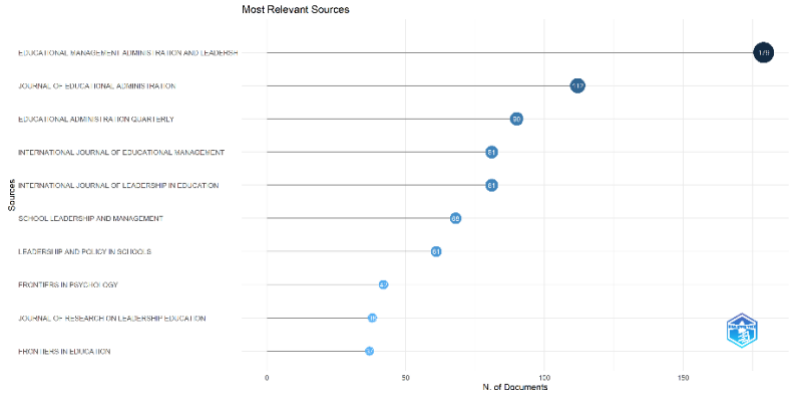



**Figure 3.** Most Relevant Sources in Educational Leadership Research (1969–2025)

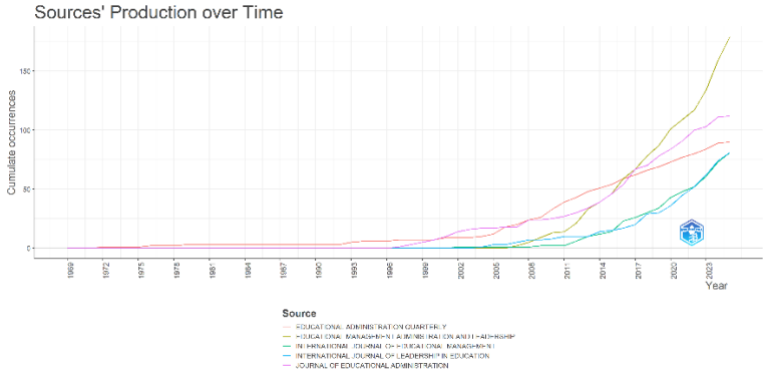



**Figure 4.** Sources' Production Over Time (Cumulative Publication Trends)

Global citation analysis (Figure 5) identifies Avolio & Gardner (2005) as the most-cited work, followed by Robinson et al. (2008) whose empirical linkage of leadership to student outcomes marked a methodological shift toward evidence-based accountability frameworks. Hallinger (2003) and Leithwood & Jantzi (2000) appear repeatedly across citation rankings, confirming the canonical influence of instructional and transformational paradigms. Local citation analysis (Figure 6) reveals a complementary pattern where distributed leadership scholarship, particularly Spillane (2005) and Diamond & Spillane (2016) dominates intra-field citation networks. This dominance reflects its specific theoretical centrality within educational leadership discourse as distinct from its broader interdisciplinary reach.

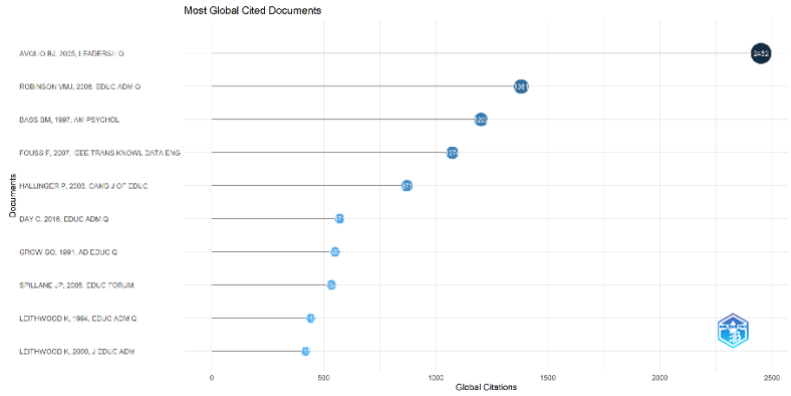



**Figure 5.** Most Globally Cited Documents in Educational Leadership (1969–2025)

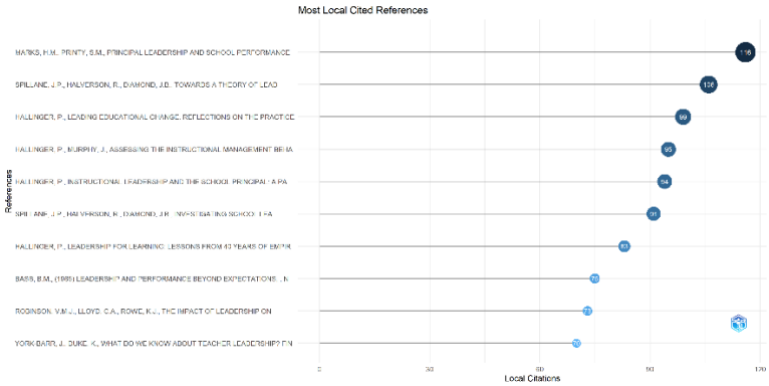



**Figure 6.** Most Locally Cited References in Educational Leadership Research (1969–2025)

Author co-citation analysis (Figure 7) identifies three major scholarly communities, which are an instructional–transformational cluster anchored by Hallinger and Leithwood; a distributed leadership

cluster centered on Spillane and Harris; and a values-based cluster associated with Bass and Avolio. Country collaboration mapping (Figure 8) confirms strong concentration among Anglophone nations, with accelerating but asymmetric participation from Asian and Middle Eastern scholarship. Latin American and Sub-Saharan African contributions remain structurally underrepresented, reflecting persistent core–periphery asymmetries in global knowledge production.

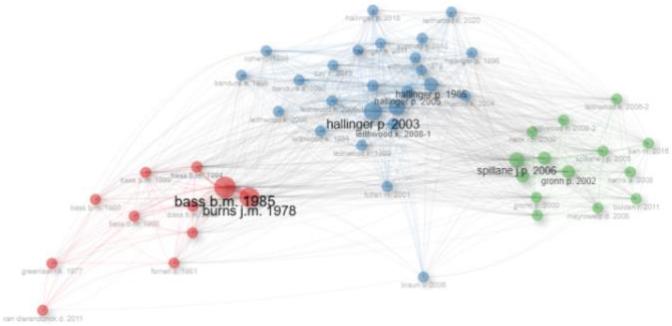



**Figure 7.** Co-Citation Network of Authors in Educational Leadership Research

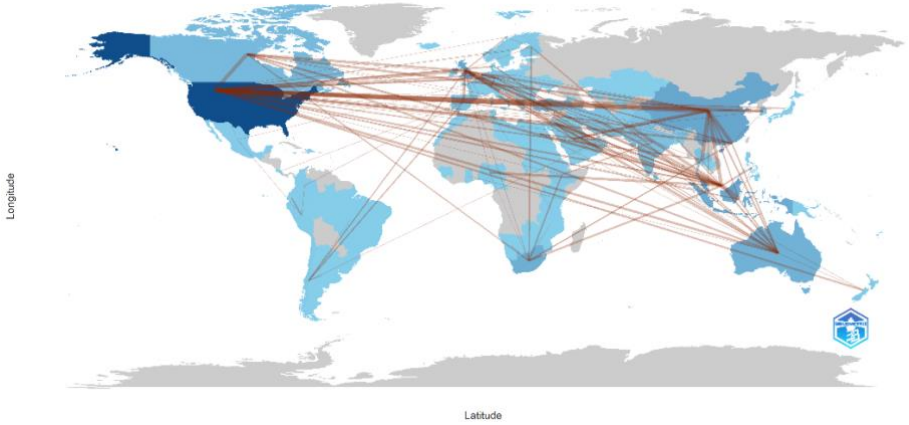



**Figure 8.** Country Collaboration Map in Educational Leadership Research

### *3.2. Thematic Analysis and Conceptual Structure (RQ2)*

Keyword co-occurrence analysis (Figure 9) identifies five major thematic clusters: (1) a transformational–distributed–instructional core emphasizing learning-focused organizational improvement; (2) a servant leadership cluster centered on ethics, relational trust, and follower well-being; (3) a contextual cluster spanning school culture and curriculum leadership; (4) a human-centered cluster incorporating gender, identity, and stakeholder perspectives; and (5) an emerging psychological cluster integrating personality, motivation, and affective dimensions. Dense cross-cluster linkages suggest increasing thematic interconnectedness among previously differentiated leadership traditions. Although co-occurrence patterns alone cannot establish theoretical integration, they provide structural evidence that concepts associated with different leadership paradigms are increasingly discussed within overlapping intellectual spaces.

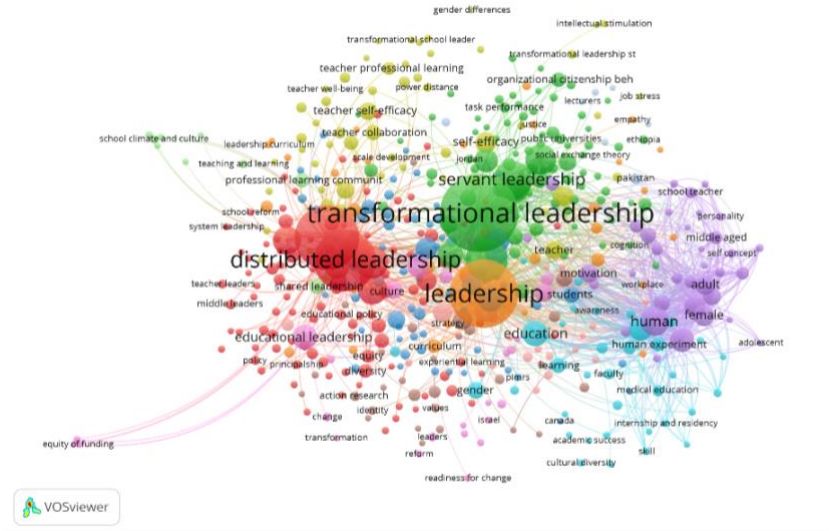



**Figure 9.** Keyword Co-occurrence Network Revealing Major Thematic Clusters

Thematic evolution analysis (Figure 9) documents a longitudinal shift across five periods. The formative era (1969–2000) was defined by contingency and instructional leadership. The 2001–2010 period saw transformational and distributed leadership emerge as co-dominant frameworks. Between 2011–2015, distributed leadership peaked alongside inclusive education themes. From 2016–2020, transformational leadership regained prominence alongside higher education leadership. The post-2020 period is characterized by crisis-responsive themes that include digital transformation, inclusive leadership, COVID-19 adaptation, and green transformational leadership.

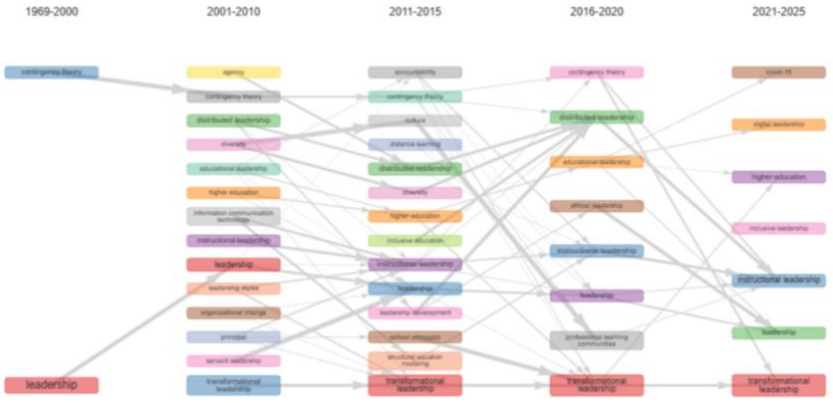



**Figure 10.** Thematic Evolution of Educational Leadership Research (1969–2025)

Trend topic analysis (Figure 11) corroborates this trajectory. Structural constructs (*school effectiveness*, *organizational change*) dominated before 2000; relational constructs (*transformational leadership*, *organizational commitment*) rose through 2015; and interdisciplinary constructs (*digital leadership*, *psychological well-being*, *green leadership*) have dominated since 2016, with *crisis leadership* and *online learning* emerging sharply after 2020.

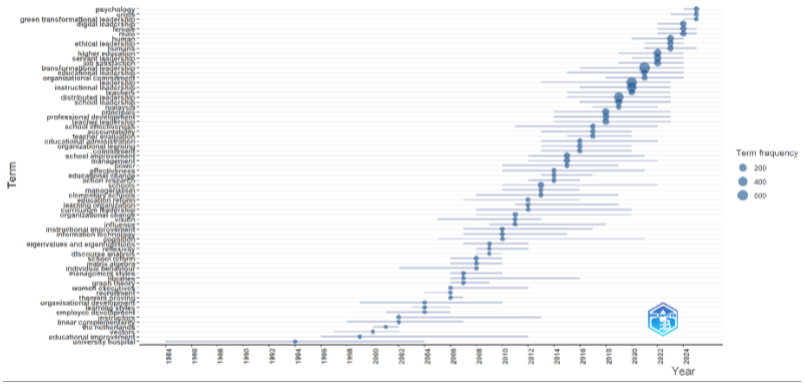



**Figure 11.** Trend Topics in Educational Leadership Research (1980–2025)

### *3.3. Paradigmatic Convergence in Educational Leadership (RQ3)*

A systematic review of 156 highly influential studies (Table 1) traces the theoretical evolution of educational leadership across six developmental eras grouped into four paradigmatic clusters, revealing not a linear progression but a cumulative, layered process in which earlier paradigms are reinterpreted rather than discarded.

**Table 1.** Systematic Literature Review Synthesis

| Author(s) & Year | Leadership Type | Theoritical Basis | Method | Key Finding | Relevance to ADIL Model |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Era 1–2 Trait, Contingency & Situational Leadership (1940s–2000s) n = 25** | | | | | |
| **Derr & Gabarro** (1972) | Contingency / Situational | Contingency Theory | Conceptual | Proposed contingency theory for educational organizations; argued leadership effectiveness depends on structural fit between leader style and environmental demands — an early conceptual precursor to context-sensitive leadership. | → Contextual–Adaptive Regulation: establishes the theoretical logic that leadership must be calibrated to situational complexity. |
| **Hanson** (1979) | Contingency / Situational | Contingency Theory | Conceptual | Applied contingency theory to school management contexts; demonstrated that neither centralized nor participative leadership is universally optimal — effectiveness requires situational alignment. | → Contextual–Adaptive Regulation: formalizes situational alignment as a core leadership principle operationalized in ADIL's adaptive mechanism. |
| **Tarter & Hoy** (1998) | Contingency / Situational | Situational Decision Theory | Conceptual | Developed a contingency model of educational decision-making; showed that optimal leadership decisions are moderated by situational variables including subordinate competence and task clarity. | → Contextual–Adaptive Regulation: provides the decision-theoretical basis for ADIL's adaptive responsiveness to shifting institutional conditions. |
| **Era 3 Transformational, Servant & Authentic Leadership (1970s–2000s) n = 50** | | | | | |
| **Bass** (1997) | Transformational | Transformational Leadership Theory | Conceptual/ Review | Argued that transformational leadership, like inspiring, intellectually stimulating, individually considerate, universally outperforms transactional leadership in elevating follower motivation and moral development across organizational and national contexts including education. | → Ethical–Transformational Core: provides the foundational theory for ADIL's moral-inspirational mechanism; Bass's four I's (idealized influence, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration) map directly to ADIL's Core constructs. |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Avolio & Gardner** (2005) | Authentic Leadership | Self-Based Leadership Theory | Conceptual | Proposed authentic leadership as the root construct of all positive leadership forms; leaders' self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective collectively foster ethical organizational climates and follower well-being. | → Ethical–Transformational Core: ADIL's emphasis on authenticity, trust, and equity-based values directly derives from Avolio & Gardner's authentic leadership construct — the most-cited work in the corpus (2,452 citations). |
| **Hallinger** (2003) | Transformational / Instructional | Instructional Leadership Framework | Conceptual/ Review | Reflected on the convergence of instructional and transformational leadership traditions in educational contexts; argued effective principals must integrate vision and inspiration (transformational) with pedagogical precision and monitoring (instructional) to drive school improvement. | → Ethical–Transformational Core + Distributed–Digital Mediation: Hallinger's integrative argument is the intellectual precursor to ADIL's dual-mechanism design, which preserves transformational vision while embedding it in distributed instructional structures. |
| **Robinson et al.** (2008) | Transformational / Instructional | Instructional Leadership Framework | Quantitative (meta-analysis) | Meta-analysis of 27 studies: instructional leadership had a significantly stronger effect on student outcomes than transformational leadership; promoting and participating in teacher professional learning was the most impactful leadership dimension (d=0.84). | → Distributed–Digital Mediation: empirically justifies ADIL's structural emphasis on distributed instructional practice and collective teacher learning over purely visionary or charismatic leadership. |
| **Era 4–5 Distributed & Instructional Leadership (1990s–2020s) n = 48** | | | | | |
| **Spillane** (2005) | Distributed Leadership | Activity Theory / Distributed Cognition | Conceptual | Reconceptualized leadership as practice stretched across multiple leaders and followers rather than located in a single role-holder; shifted inquiry from who leads to how leadership unfolds collectively in organizational contexts. | → Distributed–Digital Mediation: Spillane's distributed leadership is the direct theoretical ancestor of ADIL's second mechanism; shared leadership, collective sensemaking, and participatory networks are its operationalized constructs. |
| **Leithwood et al.** (2010) | Distributed Leadership | Transformational Leadership Theory | Quantitative (SEM) | Empirically tested four leadership paths (rational, emotional, organizational, family) through which distributed leadership indirectly influences student learning outcomes; confirmed that collective leadership significantly mediates the principal–student achievement relationship. | → Distributed–Digital Mediation: provides the causal pathway evidence that ADIL's distributed mechanism uses to explain how structural leadership distribution translates into educational outcomes. |
| **Supovitz et al.** (2010) | Instructional / Distributed | Instructional Leadership Framework | Quantitative (multilevel) | Demonstrated that principal instructional guidance shapes teacher practice and student learning indirectly through peer influence networks — confirming that distributed instructional leadership effects | → Distributed–Digital Mediation: empirically validates the network dimension of ADIL's Mediation mechanism; leadership influence operates through |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | operate through collegial relationships, not only administrative authority. | participatory structures, not hierarchical command. |
| **Era 5–6 Adaptive, Digital, Green & Inclusive Leadership (2010s–2025) n = 33** | | | | | |
| **Boylan** (2018) | Adaptive Leadership | Complexity Theory / Heifetz (1994) | Conceptual | Proposed adaptive system leadership as a framework for educational change; distinguished technical problems (solvable within existing frameworks) from adaptive challenges (requiring framework reconfiguration); argued educational leaders must develop ecological intelligence and distributed agency. | → Contextual–Adaptive Regulation: Boylan operationalizes Heifetz's adaptive leadership specifically for educational systems — providing the contextual calibration logic that defines ADIL's third mechanism. |
| **Hafiza Hamzah et al.** (2021) | Digital Leadership | Technology Acceptance / Social Learning | Quantitative (SEM) | Principals' digital leadership significantly predicts teachers' digital teaching competency; principals who model digital fluency, articulate digital vision, and create supportive digital infrastructure produce stronger teacher technology adoption. | → Distributed–Digital Mediation: directly evidences ADIL's integration of digital competence within the distributed mediation mechanism — principal digital leadership operates through teacher modeling and infrastructure creation, not technical skill alone. |
| **AlAjmi** (2022) | Digital Leadership | Digital Leadership Framework | Quantitative (survey) | Digital leadership positively predicts teachers' technology integration in Kuwaiti schools; digital competence and vision-setting were the most influential leadership dimensions that confirming that digital leadership effectiveness requires combining technical fluency with inspirational direction. | → Distributed–Digital Mediation + Ethical–Transformational Core: confirms that digital leadership's effectiveness depends on integration with visionary (transformational) leadership, precisely the combination ADIL embeds in its first two mechanisms. |

**Era 1–2. Trait, Contingency, and Situational Paradigms (pre-1940s–2000s).** Early research established individual characteristics as fixed determinants of effectiveness, reflecting industrial-era assumptions about leadership as inherent capacity. Contemporary studies (Ghafar et al., 2025; Ishak et al., 2024) reinterpret trait theory within values-based and cognitive frameworks which is demonstrating epistemic continuity: traits remain relevant but are now situated within psychosocial and ethical architectures rather than fixed-ability constructs. Building on this foundation, Fiedler (1967) and Hersey & Blanchard (1979) reframed effectiveness as context-dependent, determined by the interaction of leader behavior and environmental variables. Educational applications of this logic appeared early: Derr & Gabarro (1972) proposed a contingency framework specific to educational organizations, Hanson (1979) demonstrated that neither centralized nor participative leadership is universally optimal in school management. Recent studies such as Alene et al. (2025); Fernandes et al. (2023); Kilinç & Özdemir (2025) extend this logic further to psychological and cultural contingencies, including trust climate, crisis context, institutional learning culture. These developments indicate that the contemporary form of contingency theory places greater emphasis on relational cognition and adaptive capacity, rather than focusing solely on structural fit.

**Era 3 Transformational, Servant, and Authentic Paradigms (1970s–2000s).** Leadership was repositioned as a moral and relational process: inspiring rather than directing, transforming followers' values rather than coordinating tasks (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985, 1997). Avolio & Gardner (2005) extended this moral turn by proposing authentic leadership as the root construct of all positive leadership forms,

demonstrating that leaders' self-awareness, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective collectively foster ethical organizational climates and follower well-being. Leithwood & Jantzi (2000) demonstrated that transformational leadership enhances collaboration and teacher motivation in educational contexts, while Gümüş et al. (2021) established that instructional leadership had a stronger effect on student outcomes than transformational leadership alone, with teacher professional learning emerging as the most impactful leadership dimension. Hallinger (2003) synthesized both traditions, arguing that effective principals must integrate vision and inspiration with pedagogical precision and monitoring. Hadi et al. (2024) further revealed that transformational leadership's impact on learning outcomes depends on integration with instructional practices, which establishes a first critical convergence point between vision and pedagogy.

**Era 4–5 Distributed and Instructional Paradigms (1990s–2020s).** Spillane (2005) and Harris & Spillane (2008) reconceptualized leadership as practice distributed across organizational actors rather than vested in individual role-holders. Harris et al. (2007) empirically tested four leadership paths namely rational, emotional, organizational, and family, through which distributed leadership indirectly influences student learning outcomes, confirming that collective leadership significantly mediates the principal–student achievement relationship. May & Supovitz (2011) demonstrated that principal instructional guidance shapes teacher practice and student learning indirectly through peer influence networks, confirming that distributed instructional leadership effects operate through collegial relationships rather than administrative authority alone. Empirical studies (Jutzi et al., 2025; Li et al., 2024) further confirm that distributed leadership's effectiveness depends on trust, shared vision, and supportive culture which align distributed practice with transformational and servant principles. This represents the first major convergence point: the moral and structural paradigms begin integrating through shared assumptions about empowerment and collective capacity.

**Era 5–6 Adaptive, Digital, Green, and Inclusive Paradigms (2010s–2025).** Digitalization, demographic diversity, and crisis contexts catalyzed hybrid leadership repertoires. Boylan (2018) proposed adaptive system leadership as a framework for educational change, distinguishing technical problems from adaptive challenges and arguing that educational leaders must develop ecological intelligence and distributed agency. Studies on digital leadership (AlAjmi, 2022; Hafiza Hamzah et al., 2021) confirmed that principals' digital competence and vision-setting significantly predict teachers' technology integration, but only when combined with distributed supportive structures, not as a standalone style. Studies on digital-transformational leadership (Berkovich & Hassan, 2025; Eitan & Gazit, 2024), inclusive leadership (Meier, 2025; D. Wang et al., 2024), and resilient leadership (Kaya, 2024; Zadok et al., 2024) further reveal how leaders blend transformational vision, adaptive responsiveness, and psychological care. The COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath accelerated convergence beyond paradigm coexistence toward active integration. Green transformational leadership (Asad et al., 2024; Xing et al., 2024), crisis-resilient leadership (Gigliotti & Alvarez-Robinson, 2025), and post-pandemic inclusive models (Aboramadan et al., 2022) share a common triadic architecture: an ethical-motivational core (transformational/servant), distributed-digital mediation structures (distributed/instructional), and contextual-adaptive regulation (contingency/resilient). This triadic structure is the empirical precursor to the ADIL Model presented in the Discussion.

Across all four clusters, three meta-patterns are evident, namely the persistence and reinterpretation of core paradigms, the progressive expansion into new contextual domains, and the increasing integration of ethical, psychological, and sustainability dimensions. These patterns confirm a field moving from paradigm competition toward paradigmatic synthesis, in which each successive era adds interpretive layers rather than replacing what came before.

## *Discussion*

### From Paradigm Competition to Integrative Synthesis

The findings extend prior research by Hallinger (2003) and Leithwood and Jantzi (2000), who identified transformational and instructional leadership as prominent traditions within educational

leadership scholarship. The present bibliometric evidence shows increasing structural interconnectedness among these and related paradigms within the field's citation and thematic networks. Rather than demonstrating that theoretical distinctions have disappeared, these patterns suggest that educational leadership scholarship increasingly draws upon concepts and explanatory mechanisms across traditional paradigm boundaries. When considered together with the qualitative synthesis, this interconnectedness provides evidence of an emerging integrative orientation within the field.

This finding extends prior research by Campbell et al. (2019) and Shaked & Benoliel (2020), who provided qualitative and school-level evidence that transformational and instructional leadership complement each other in specific institutional contexts. The present study advances this by demonstrating the same complementarity at scale, as evidenced across 3,509 articles from over 70 countries and 56 years, which indicates that cross-paradigm citation co-occurrence is not merely a local or context-specific phenomenon but a global pattern at the field level. This difference in scale is theoretically significant because it suggests that integration is not simply a strategic choice made by individual schools, but rather a structural feature of how the field has evolved intellectually.

The practical implication is substantial, as it challenges the conventional structure of leadership preparation programs. Rather than treating transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership as separate domains, the evidence suggests these competencies are most effective when developed as an integrated repertoire, which implies that modular or sequential training models may be reinforcing divisions that no longer reflect the field's intellectual reality. This supports the integrative leadership development perspective advanced by Botha & Aleme (2023), but with stronger grounding in bibliometric structural evidence.

The observed geographic concentration constrains the generalizability of this convergence claim, as the collaboration map indicates that integration in citation networks primarily reflects an Anglophone paradigmatic consensus, with scholars from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia dominating the interconnected clusters. Building on Hariri et al. (2016), who documented this asymmetry at a single point in time, the present study demonstrates its structural persistence through 2025 despite more than five decades of field development. This raises a critical question regarding whose paradigms are actually converging and under what terms, since the limited representation of Latin American, Sub-Saharan African, and indigenous leadership frameworks in the citation core suggests that the identified synthesis remains partial. As such, what appears as integration is better understood as an Anglophone-centered theoretical reconciliation, which underscores the need for future research to strengthen South–South collaboration networks and elevate non-Western leadership scholarship in order to broaden the scope of convergence.

**Thematic Reorientation: From Structure to Ethics and Adaptivity**

This finding extends prior research by Aboramadan et al. (2022), who identified a shift toward relational and ethical leadership paradigms within a specific regional context (Middle Eastern educational institutions). The present study advances this finding in three ways. First, it demonstrates the same shift at global scale across 3,509 articles. Second, it shows that the shift is not merely additive, as ethical and relational constructs have not simply joined the publication landscape, but have partially displaced structural constructs (*school management, organizational efficiency*) in keyword frequency since 2016. And third, it locates this shift within a 56-year trajectory, allowing us to identify it as a structural paradigmatic reorientation rather than a regional trend or temporary publication surge.

This finding also extends prior research by (Marzi et al., 2025b), who established B-SLR as a methodology for mapping intellectual evolution in management science, but did not apply it specifically to educational leadership. The present application reveals a domain-specific pattern that management science bibliometrics could not have detected: the emergence of *crisis leadership*, *green transformational leadership*, and *post-pandemic resilience* as high-frequency educational leadership constructs after 2020 reflects education's distinctive vulnerability to systemic disruption, in which the

COVID-19 school closure crisis and sustainability imperatives have penetrated educational leadership discourse more deeply and persistently than in corporate or healthcare management contexts.

Contrary to interpretations that frame post-2020 crisis leadership as a predominantly reactive response emerging in direct reaction to the COVID-19 disruption, as reflected in much of the early pandemic-era leadership literature, the present trend analysis indicates that themes of resilience and adaptivity had already been gaining traction prior to 2020. This pattern suggests that the pandemic may be better understood as an accelerative catalyst rather than the origin point of these leadership orientations. While such evidence does not, on its own, warrant the conclusion that resilience and adaptivity constitute fully structural features of educational leadership, it does point to their increasing centrality within the evolving leadership discourse.

**Mechanisms of Paradigmatic Integration**

The systematic review of 156 influential studies traces educational leadership's theoretical evolution across six developmental eras grouped into four paradigmatic clusters – revealing not a linear succession of paradigms but a cumulative, layered process of theoretical integration.

*Complementary integration.* This integration is most visible in transformational–instructional combinations and demonstrates that moral motivation and pedagogical precision function sequentially and synergistically, not as alternatives. This finding extends prior research by Kwan (2020), who demonstrated the coexistence of transformational and instructional leadership in Hong Kong schools, by providing a mechanistic explanation: transformational behaviors amplify teacher receptiveness to instructional guidance by building the motivational and cultural preconditions that make instructional interventions effective; instructional leadership, in turn, anchors transformational energy in measurable learning outcomes, preventing vision from remaining aspirational without pedagogical grounding (Hadi et al., 2024). The field-level implication is that neither paradigm alone is sufficient; transformational leadership without instructional anchoring risks motivational rhetoric without educational substance, while instructional leadership without transformational framing risks technical compliance without professional commitment.

*Layered integration.* This pattern is exemplified by servant–distributed and transformational–inclusive combinations and shows that paradigms combine cumulatively, with each layer amplifying the others' effectiveness. Contrary to models that treat servant and distributed leadership as theoretically independent (Jutzi et al., 2025; Spillane, 2005), the present systematic review finds consistent interactive effects: servant leadership strengthens the relational trust and psychological safety that distributed leadership requires to function, as teachers exercise distributed agency more readily when empowerment is grounded in authentic care (Nobles, 2019; Takamatsu et al., 2025). These layered findings suggest that paradigm selection is not a binary choice but a configuration problem; the question is not which paradigm to use but which combination, in what sequence, serves which educational context.

*Contextual hybridization.* This form of integration is evident in digital-transformational and adaptive-resilient combinations and demonstrates that leadership effectiveness depends fundamentally on ecological validity. This finding extends Fiedler (1967) contingency logic by embedding technological fluency and social diversity as core contextual moderators rather than peripheral situational variables. In Fiedler's original framework, the leader's task was to match a fixed leadership style to situational favorability; contemporary evidence suggests that the task has fundamentally changed, as leaders must develop dynamic repertoires that reconfigure themselves as conditions shift, rather than selecting a stable style for a given situation (Alene et al., 2025; Berkovich & Hassan, 2025; Kaya, 2024).

*Mechanistic deepening.* This trajectory reflects the field's increasing reliance on psychological mediators and represents methodological maturation with theoretical consequences. This finding extends prior research by Gümüş et al. (2021) and Hallinger et al. (2018), who established multi-level SEM as the standard for educational leadership research, by showing that the constructs being

mediated have shifted: whereas early mediation models focused on structural outcomes, contemporary studies increasingly mediate through psychological constructs such as trust climate (Kilinç et al., 2024) and psychological safety (Dahleez et al., 2023) among others. This shift signals that the field now theorizes leadership effectiveness as fundamentally about what leaders do to the minds and relational experiences of followers, not merely to organizational structures.

**The ADIL Model: Theoretical Synthesis and Structural Logic**

The Adaptive Digital-Inclusive Leadership (ADIL) framework represents an evidence-informed conceptual synthesis derived from the bibliometric patterns and qualitative theoretical relationships identified in this study (Figure 12). ADIL is not proposed as an empirically validated leadership theory or as a replacement for established paradigms. Rather, it provides an integrative conceptual architecture for explaining how ethical–transformational, distributed–digital, and contextual–adaptive mechanisms may operate together in contemporary educational leadership. Its architecture therefore represents a set of theoretically derived propositions that require subsequent empirical testing across educational levels and sociocultural contexts.

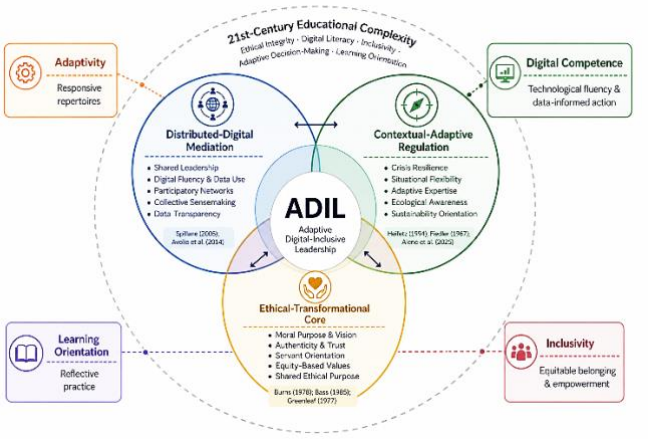



**Figure 12.** The Adaptive Digital-Inclusive Leadership (ADIL) Model

The ADIL Model's triadic architecture reflects the three levels at which educational leadership operates simultaneously and which no prior single-paradigm framework has unified. The Ethical–Transformational Core is positioned as the foundation, not because ethics is more important than structure or adaptivity, but because the systematic review evidence consistently shows that distributed and adaptive mechanisms underperform when they are not grounded in shared moral purpose and relational trust (Kilinç et al., 2024; Nobles, 2019; Spillane, 2005). Without ethical grounding, distributed leadership becomes bureaucratic delegation; without transformational vision, adaptive leadership becomes reactive improvisation. The Core thus functions as the legitimating condition for the other two mechanisms.

The Distributed–Digital Mediation mechanism is positioned as the middle layer, serving as the structural and communicative architecture through which ethical vision becomes organizationally enacted. This placement reflects two convergent findings: first, that distributed structures are the most consistently effective vehicle for scaling leadership influence beyond the individual (Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2005); and second, that in contemporary educational institutions, digital infrastructure has become the medium through which distribution operates, as data systems, collaborative platforms, and virtual networks now constitute the practical architecture of distributed leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Berkovich & Hassan, 2025). Positioning digital fluency within this mechanism rather than treating it as a separate leadership style resolves a theoretical confusion in the literature: digital leadership is not a new paradigm competing with transformational or distributed leadership, but the contemporary form those paradigms take in digitally mediated organizational environments.

The Contextual–Adaptive Regulation mechanism is positioned as the outer, responsive layer, providing the capacity that enables the entire system to recalibrate as educational conditions shift. This placement is theoretically grounded in Heifetz's (1994) distinction between technical problems, which are solvable within existing frameworks, and adaptive challenges, which require changes to the frameworks themselves. Contemporary educational leadership faces predominantly adaptive challenges, including demographic transformation, technological disruption, sustainability imperatives, and crisis conditions, none of which can be addressed by applying a fixed ethical-distributive framework. Contextual–Adaptive Regulation provides the meta-capacity to sense when existing leadership approaches need reconfiguration and to execute that reconfiguration without losing ethical or distributive coherence.

The bidirectional arrows among the three mechanisms represent feedback loops that make ADIL a self-correcting system rather than a linear model. Ethical vision enables and legitimates distributed digital structures; distributed intelligence generates contextual information that informs adaptive regulation; and adaptive regulation, in turn, identifies when ethical values need re-articulation or when distributive structures need redesign, feeding learning back into the Core. This circular logic distinguishes ADIL from prior integrative frameworks such as Leithwood's four paths model and Hallinger's instructional management model, both of which follow an architecturally linear sequence of leader behavior, mediating conditions, and outcomes. ADIL instead proposes a dynamic system in which outcomes and contexts continuously reshape the leadership behaviors that produce them. The outer ring, labeled 21st-Century Educational Complexity, reinforces this dynamic character: the volatility, digital disruption, social diversity, and crisis conditions it represents are not problems ADIL resolves but the conditions to which it must continuously adapt, reflecting the post-paradigmatic principle that leadership effectiveness is always institutionally situated, never universally fixed.

Theoretically, ADIL advances three contributions beyond prior integrative proposals. First, it provides an architectural rationale by positioning ethical grounding, distributed-digital structuring, and adaptive regulation as operating at distinct and simultaneously necessary levels of leadership action: values, structure, and strategy. Second, it resolves the digital leadership taxonomy problem by embedding digital fluency within the Distributed–Digital Mediation mechanism rather than treating it as a standalone paradigm, thereby explaining digital competence as mediating infrastructure rather than an independent leadership style. Third, it operationalizes post-paradigmatic theory: whereas earlier integrative calls (Lumby, 2009; Woods & Gronn, 2009) remained conceptual, ADIL grounds its synthesis in 56-year empirical patterns, rendering it testable.

Contrary to frameworks that treat inclusive leadership as supplementary (D. Wang et al., 2024; T. Wang et al., 2025), ADIL embeds inclusivity as a constitutive feature across all three mechanisms – equity-based values in the Core, participatory belonging in the Mediation layer, and ecological awareness in the Regulation layer. Inclusion is thus a structural requirement of leadership at every level, not a context-specific module, as an insight with direct implications for leadership preparation programs that currently treat diversity competency as a standalone domain.

Two limitations qualify these contributions. First, the bibliometric corpus over-represents Anglophone governance contexts; the model's constructs, particularly the Contextual–Adaptive Regulation mechanism, assume institutional flexibility and digital infrastructure that may not be available in constrained or non-Western educational systems. Cross-cultural validation in Sub-Saharan African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American contexts is a priority for future research. Second, ADIL remains primarily theoretical and requires operationalization through multi-level SEM studies, comparative case research, and longitudinal tracking before its dimensions can be treated as empirically confirmed rather than conceptually proposed.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the intellectual evolution of educational leadership through an integrated Bibliometric–Systematic Literature Review of 3,509 Scopus-indexed articles published between 1969

and 2025 and a focused qualitative synthesis of 156 influential studies. The bibliometric findings reveal substantial growth and diversification in educational leadership scholarship, alongside persistent geographical asymmetries in global knowledge production. Thematic analysis further indicates a gradual expansion from predominantly structural and administrative concerns toward relational, ethical, digital, inclusive, and adaptive dimensions of leadership.

Taken together, the bibliometric patterns and qualitative synthesis suggest that contemporary educational leadership is increasingly characterized by theoretical interconnectedness rather than by the isolated development of individual leadership paradigms. Four recurring forms of integration—complementary integration, layered integration, contextual hybridization, and mechanistic deepening—provide the conceptual basis for the proposed Adaptive Digital-Inclusive Leadership (ADIL) framework.

ADIL organizes this emerging integration through three interrelated mechanisms: the Ethical–Transformational Core, Distributed–Digital Mediation, and Contextual–Adaptive Regulation. The framework proposes that contemporary educational leadership can be understood not as the application of a single optimal leadership style but as the context-sensitive configuration of ethical purpose, collective and digitally mediated agency, and adaptive responsiveness. In this sense, the findings point toward an emerging post-paradigmatic orientation in educational leadership scholarship while preserving the theoretical contributions of established leadership traditions.

The principal contribution of ADIL is therefore conceptual rather than confirmatory. It provides an evidence-informed architecture through which relationships among established and emerging leadership paradigms can be theorized and subsequently tested. Future research should operationalize the proposed mechanisms and examine their validity across educational levels, institutional settings, and sociocultural contexts. Such empirical validation is necessary before ADIL can be treated as an established explanatory model of educational leadership practice.

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