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Strategic educational leadership: teacher empowerment and the transformation of learning environments

Liderazgo educativo estratégico: empoderamiento docente y transformación de los entornos de aprendizaje

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ABSTRACT

Strategic educational leadership is a fundamental element for strengthening teacher participation, promoting innovation, and fostering the transformation of learning environments. This study analyzes and synthesizes the available scientific evidence on strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and the transformation of learning environments.

A qualitative systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Scientific articles published between 2020 and 2026 were analyzed from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. After the identification, screening, eligibility, and selection process, 15 scientific studies were included.

The findings showed that transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership styles are consistently associated with teacher autonomy, participation in decision-making, collaboration, and innovation. Teacher empowerment was also associated with more participatory, flexible, and continuously improving school environments.

The reviewed evidence suggests that strategic educational leadership is associated with stronger teacher empowerment and with the transformation of learning environments.

Educational institutions should promote collaborative, flexible, and professionally oriented leadership models to respond effectively to current educational challenges.

Keywords: educational leadership, teacher empowerment, educational innovation, learning environments, strategic leadership.

RESUMEN

El liderazgo educativo estratégico constituye un elemento fundamental para fortalecer la participación docente, promover la innovación y favorecer la transformación de los entornos de aprendizaje. Este estudio analiza y sintetiza la evidencia científica disponible sobre el liderazgo educativo estratégico, el empoderamiento docente y la transformación de los entornos de aprendizaje.

Se desarrolló una revisión sistemática de literatura con enfoque cualitativo, siguiendo las directrices PRISMA 2020. Se analizaron artículos científicos publicados entre 2020 y 2026 en las bases de datos Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC y ScienceDirect. Tras el proceso de identificación, cribado, elegibilidad y selección, se incluyeron 15 estudios científicos.

Los hallazgos evidenciaron que los estilos de liderazgo transformacional, distribuido e instruccional favorecen la autonomía docente, la participación en la toma de decisiones, la colaboración y la innovación. Asimismo, el empoderamiento docente se relaciona con ambientes escolares más participativos, flexibles y orientados a la mejora continua.

El liderazgo educativo estratégico contribuye significativamente al fortalecimiento del empoderamiento docente y a la transformación de los entornos de aprendizaje. Se concluye que las instituciones educativas deben promover modelos de liderazgo colaborativos, flexibles y orientados al desarrollo profesional para responder eficazmente a los actuales desafíos educativos.

Palabras clave: liderazgo educativo, empoderamiento docente, innovación educativa, entornos de aprendizaje, liderazgo estratégico.



1. INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions currently operate in increasingly complex environments characterized by technological advancement, changing social demands, diverse student needs, and the continuous search for higher educational quality. Within this context, strategic educational leadership has become a fundamental component for guiding institutional processes, establishing shared goals, encouraging innovation, and improving teaching and learning practices. Educational leadership is no longer limited to administrative responsibilities; rather, it involves creating a common vision, strengthening collaboration, supporting professional development, and promoting organizational conditions that enable educational communities to respond effectively to contemporary challenges. Hojeij (2024) emphasizes that educational leadership approaches, including instructional, distributed, and transformational leadership, can foster creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship within educational settings. Similarly, Veletić et al. (2023) found that leadership styles are associated with important dimensions of school climate, including trust, shared beliefs, organizational rules, and the encouragement of new initiatives.

Previous research has demonstrated that effective school leadership can influence teachers' professional experiences, motivation, participation, and capacity to contribute to institutional improvement. Teacher empowerment is particularly relevant because it involves providing educators with greater autonomy, responsibility, participation in decision-making, and opportunities to influence educational processes. Yao et al. (2024) reported that teacher empowerment can positively influence professionalism while strengthening trust among colleagues and teachers' affective commitment toward their institutions. Furthermore, Teng et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of distributed leadership for promoting teacher innovation, demonstrating that empowering teachers through shared leadership can contribute to the development of a more innovative teaching workforce. These findings suggest that teachers should not be viewed solely as implementers of institutional decisions but as active participants capable of contributing knowledge, ideas, and professional experience to educational transformation.

Strategic educational leadership is also closely connected to the quality of learning environments. School leaders can influence the organizational and pedagogical conditions in



which teaching and learning take place by facilitating communication, establishing clear objectives, supporting teachers, and encouraging collaborative decision-making. Abuhassira et al. (2024) indicate that transformational leadership can positively influence classroom interactions by strengthening communication between educational leaders and teachers and supporting teaching and learning processes. Likewise, Al-Zu'bi et al. (2024) emphasize that a healthy educational environment is associated with collaborative working cultures, clearly established institutional goals, teacher commitment, and continuous attention to student performance. Consequently, transforming learning environments requires more than introducing new technologies or physical resources; it also demands leadership practices capable of developing trust, cooperation, professional support, and a shared commitment to educational improvement.

Teacher empowerment represents one of the most significant mechanisms through which educational leadership can contribute to sustainable institutional change. When teachers perceive that their ideas are valued, that they have opportunities to participate in decisions, and that they receive sufficient professional support, they may develop a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility regarding school improvement. Davis (2024) argues that environments characterized by trust and professional responsibility are essential for cultivating teacher agency. Similarly, Pitler (2024) explains that empowering educators to participate in processes of change can foster ownership, collaboration, continuous learning, and sustainable transformation within schools. Therefore, leadership strategies that encourage participation and shared responsibility can strengthen teachers' capacity to become agents of educational innovation and transformation.

Recent studies have also reinforced the relationship between educational leadership, teacher motivation, and institutional learning. Baydar and Demirci (2026) explain that instructional leadership involves guiding teachers, participating actively in instructional processes, promoting professional development, encouraging collaboration, and establishing strategic decisions focused on student achievement. Their study further indicates that instructional leadership can increase teacher motivation by creating an environment in which educators feel professionally supported and valued. In a similar direction, Yongco (2026) found that transformational leadership was a strong predictor of teacher performance and student



achievement, emphasizing the importance of leadership practices based on vision, individualized support, professional commitment, and instructional improvement.

The study of strategic educational leadership is therefore justified by the need to integrate and critically examine the available scientific evidence regarding how leadership practices contribute to teacher empowerment and the transformation of learning environments. Although previous research has addressed leadership styles, teacher performance, innovation, school climate, professional autonomy, and motivation, the existing evidence remains dispersed across different educational contexts and methodological approaches. A systematic synthesis of recent research can therefore provide a clearer understanding of the main relationships, recurring findings, and emerging trends associated with these dimensions.

Based on these considerations, the general objective of this study is to analyze and synthesize the scientific evidence published between 2020 and 2026 on strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and the transformation of learning environments. Specifically, the review seeks to identify the leadership approaches most frequently associated with teacher autonomy, participation, collaboration, and innovation, as well as to integrate the findings regarding their contribution to the development of more participatory, flexible, and continuously improving educational environments.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Strategic educational leadership refers to the capacity of school leaders to establish institutional goals, guide educational processes, promote collaboration, and create conditions that support continuous improvement. Contemporary leadership models emphasize that decision-making should not remain exclusively in the hands of principals but should involve teachers and other members of the educational community. In this regard, **O'Shea (2021)** found that distributed leadership has a significant positive relationship with teachers' implementation of innovative teaching practices, particularly when educators are given opportunities to participate in decisions and assume leadership responsibilities.

Leadership also plays an important role in facilitating educational innovation and adapting schools to technological and pedagogical change. **Schmitz et al. (2023)** indicate that transformational leadership practices can support teachers in the effective integration of



digital technologies by establishing shared goals and providing organizational support. Furthermore, Nadeem (2024) explains that distributed leadership transforms leadership from an individual responsibility into a collective process in which different members of the institution contribute their knowledge and abilities toward school improvement. Therefore, strategic leadership can strengthen institutional adaptability, collaboration, innovation, and the achievement of educational objectives.

Teacher Empowerment and Transformation of Learning Environments

Teacher empowerment can be understood as the development of professional autonomy, participation in decision-making, self-efficacy, leadership capacity, and responsibility for educational improvement. Empowered teachers are more likely to contribute ideas, collaborate with colleagues, and participate actively in processes of institutional transformation. Wang et al. (2024) found that transformational leadership is associated with teacher autonomy and that teacher empowerment and organizational climate play important roles in explaining this relationship. This suggests that leadership practices can create conditions in which teachers perceive greater professional influence and capacity to make meaningful decisions.

Teacher empowerment is also associated with the development of innovative learning environments. Mokhlis and Abdullah (2025) reported a strong positive effect of teacher empowerment on the innovation climate of schools, indicating that teachers who perceive greater autonomy, professional competence, and participation can contribute more effectively to institutional innovation.

3. METHODOLOGY

a) Study Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on the analysis and synthesis of previously published scientific evidence related to strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and the transformation of learning environments. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the purpose is to interpret the main theoretical contributions, relationships, findings, and trends reported in recent educational research rather than to collect primary numerical data.



The research is classified as a systematic literature review, since it follows an organized and reproducible process for identifying, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant scientific studies. Systematic reviews allow researchers to integrate evidence from different sources using previously established selection criteria, thereby increasing transparency and reducing bias in the review process (Newman & Gough, 2020). In educational research, systematic reviews are particularly useful for identifying patterns, research gaps, and accumulated evidence regarding educational practices and policies (Ghamrawi et al., 2025). The review focused on studies published between 2020 and 2026, a period selected to ensure that the evidence reflects recent developments in educational leadership, teacher participation, professional autonomy, innovation, and learning environments.

b) Method

The study followed a systematic review design based on the PRISMA 2020 model (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*). PRISMA provides a structured framework for transparently reporting the identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion of studies in a systematic review (Page et al., 2021). The updated PRISMA 2020 statement includes a 27-item checklist and revised flow diagrams designed to improve transparency and reproducibility in evidence synthesis.

The methodological procedure was additionally supported by the recommendations of Ghamrawi et al. (2025) for systematic reviews in educational research, particularly regarding the formulation of search strategies, application of eligibility criteria, critical evaluation, and synthesis of findings.

No meta-analysis was conducted because the purpose of the study was to perform a qualitative synthesis of the evidence, considering differences in research contexts, populations, variables, and methodological designs among the selected articles. A systematic review does not necessarily require statistical meta-analysis when the primary objective is to identify, critically evaluate, and qualitatively integrate available evidence (Cajal et al., 2020).

c) Phases of the Study

The methodological process was organized into four phases: search, evaluation, analysis, and synthesis.

Phase 1. Search



The first phase consisted of a structured search for scientific articles related to strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, transformational and distributed leadership, teacher autonomy, educational innovation, and learning environments. The databases consulted were Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect.

The bibliographic search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. The search strategy combined terms related to educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and the transformation of learning environments using the Boolean operators AND and OR.

The general search equation was:

("strategic educational leadership" OR "educational leadership" OR "transformational leadership" OR "distributed leadership" OR "instructional leadership") AND ("teacher empowerment" OR "teacher autonomy" OR "teacher participation" OR "teacher innovation" OR "professional development") AND ("learning environment" OR "learning environments" OR "school climate" OR "school improvement" OR "educational innovation")

The search equation was adapted to the syntax and search fields available in each database while preserving the same three conceptual blocks. Searches were restricted to publications from 2020 to 2026, peer-reviewed journal articles, publications in English or Spanish, and studies conducted in educational contexts.

The last bibliographic search was conducted on June 19, 2026. For transparency and reproducibility, the search strategy used in each database included the corresponding search fields, filters, and number of records retrieved.

Table 1.

Search Strategy and Records Retrieved by Database

Database	Search date	Records retrieved
Scopus	June 19, 2026	28
Web of Science	June 19, 2026	18
ERIC	June 19, 2026	16
ScienceDirect	June 19, 2026	24
Total	—	86

Note. The table summarizes the bibliographic search conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect on June 19, 2026. The search strategy combined terms



related to strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and transformation of learning environments using the Boolean operators AND and OR. A total of 86 records were identified before the removal of duplicates and other excluded records. Own elaboration.

Phase 2. Evaluation

The identified records were evaluated according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. First, 13 duplicate records were removed. An additional 7 documents were excluded because they corresponded to theses, reports, non-peer-reviewed publications, or studies outside the established period. Consequently, 66 records proceeded to title and abstract screening.

During the screening stage, 34 articles were excluded because their objectives were not sufficiently related to educational leadership, teacher empowerment, or learning environments. Thus, 32 full-text articles were sought for retrieval. Two articles could not be accessed in full text, leaving 30 studies for eligibility assessment.

Subsequently, 15 articles were excluded because they did not directly address the study variables, presented insufficient methodological information, or did not provide findings applicable to the research objective. Consequently, 15 scientific articles were included in the final systematic review.

The explicit documentation of study identification, screening, exclusion, and inclusion contributes to the transparency and replicability of systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021).

Quality Assessment of Included Studies

The methodological quality of the 15 studies included in the systematic review was assessed using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Tools. The specific checklist was selected according to the methodological design of each study, allowing the assessment to consider criteria appropriate to different types of research.

The appraisal examined aspects such as clarity of the research objectives, appropriateness of the methodological design, characteristics of the sample or study context, reliability of data collection procedures, adequacy of the analysis, consistency between results and conclusions, and identification of potential sources of bias.

Each study was independently reviewed according to the applicable JBI criteria, with responses classified as “Yes,” “No,” “Unclear,” or “Not applicable.” The results of the methodological appraisal were recorded in the analytical matrix and considered



during the interpretation and synthesis of the evidence. Studies were not excluded solely on the basis of methodological limitations; instead, the quality assessment was used to determine the strength and reliability of the evidence contributed by each study.

Table 2.*Methodological Quality Assessment of Included Studies*

Study	Study design	Appraisal tool	Main methodological assessment	Overall appraisal
O'Shea (2021)	Quantitative analytical study	JB1 Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Clear objectives, defined variables and appropriate multilevel statistical analysis; limitations inherent to observational data.	Adequate
Schmitz et al. (2023)	Quantitative analytical study	JB1 Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Clearly defined variables, appropriate measures and statistical analysis; cross-sectional design limits causal inference.	Adequate
Veletić et al. (2023)	Quantitative comparative/cross-sectional study	JB1 Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Large comparative dataset and appropriate analytical procedures; potential limitations related to self-reported perceptions.	Adequate
Abuhassira et al. (2024)	Quantitative analytical study	JB1 Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Objectives and variables clearly established; statistical relationships adequately analyzed, although observational design limits causality.	Adequate
Al-Zu'bi et al. (2024)	Quantitative cross-sectional study	JB1 Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Clearly defined educational context and analytical procedures; possible limitations associated with contextual generalizability.	Adequate
Hojeij (2024)	Narrative literature review	SANRA	Clear relevance and objectives, literature-based argument and appropriate referencing; narrative design has lower reproducibility than a systematic review.	Adequate with limitations



Study	Study design	Appraisal tool	Main methodological assessment	Overall appraisal
Mokhlis & Abdullah (2025)	Quantitative cross-sectional study	JBİ Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Randomly selected sample of 376 teachers and structural equation modeling; cross-sectional nature restricts causal interpretation.	Adequate
Nadeem (2024)	Narrative/conceptual review	SANRA	Relevant theoretical synthesis and coherent discussion, but limited systematic description of study identification and selection.	Adequate with limitations
Wang et al. (2024)	Quantitative analytical study	JBİ Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Appropriate quantitative analysis of transformational leadership and teacher autonomy; limitations related to observational design.	Adequate
Yao et al. (2024)	Quantitative cross-sectional study	JBİ Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Sample of 522 teachers and structural equation modeling with clearly specified mediating variables; causal interpretation remains limited.	Adequate
Teng et al. (2024)	Quantitative analytical study	JBİ Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Clearly defined leadership and innovation constructs with appropriate statistical analysis; cross-sectional data represent the main limitation.	Adequate
Davis (2024)	Conceptual/professional article	JBİ Text and Opinion Checklist	Relevant discussion of teacher agency and empowerment, although empirical methodological evidence is limited.	Adequate with limitations
Pitler (2024)	Conceptual/professional article	JBİ Text and Opinion Checklist	Provides relevant arguments regarding educational change and teacher participation; limited empirical methodological detail.	Adequate with limitations
Baydar & Demirci (2026)	Quantitative correlational study	JBİ Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Clearly examines relationships among instructional leadership, teacher motivation and organizational learning;	Adequate



Study	Study design	Appraisal tool	Main methodological assessment	Overall appraisal
			observational design limits causal conclusions.	
Yongco (2026)	Quantitative correlational study	JB1 Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Defined sample, correlation, regression and ANOVA procedures; results are clearly reported, although contextual and cross-sectional limitations remain.	Adequate

Note. Methodological quality was assessed according to the design of each included study. Quantitative observational studies were evaluated using the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies, narrative reviews using the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative Review Articles (SANRA), and conceptual or professional articles using the JBI criteria for text and opinion papers. Overall judgments considered methodological clarity, appropriateness of design, data collection and analysis, consistency of results and conclusions, and potential sources of bias.

Phase 3. Analysis

In the third phase, the 15 selected articles were examined using a structured analytical matrix. The following information was extracted from each study: author and year, country or educational context, research objective, leadership approach, characteristics of teacher empowerment, methodological design, principal findings, and contribution to the transformation of learning environments.

The studies were subsequently grouped into thematic categories according to the similarities identified in their findings. Particular attention was given to three analytical dimensions: strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and transformation of learning environments. Structured extraction and categorization facilitate the comparison of evidence across studies and improve the consistency of systematic synthesis (Ghamrawi et al., 2025). In addition to data extraction, the methodological quality and potential risk of bias of each included study were systematically assessed according to its research design.

Phase 4. Synthesis



Finally, the information obtained from the selected studies was integrated through a qualitative narrative synthesis. Findings were compared to identify recurring patterns, agreements, differences, and relationships among the study variables.

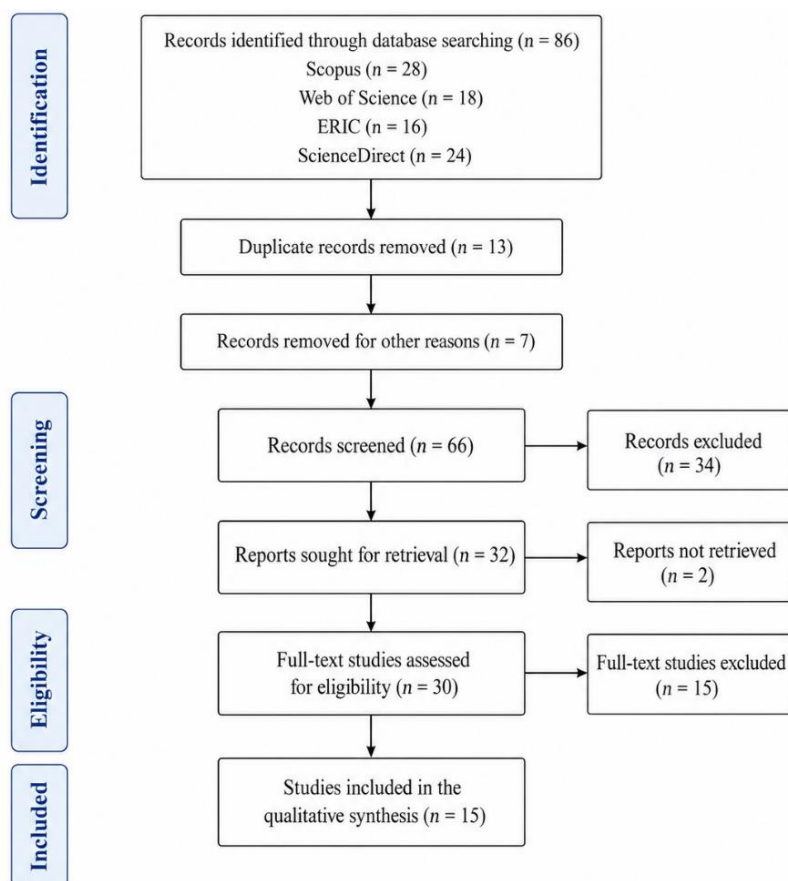
The synthesis focused particularly on the relationships reported between strategic, transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership practices and teacher autonomy, participation in decision-making, professional collaboration, innovation, and the development of learning environments oriented toward continuous improvement. This phase also made it possible to identify research gaps and areas requiring further investigation.

Systematic synthesis aims to move beyond the description of individual studies by integrating their findings into a coherent interpretation of the available body of evidence (Newman & Gough, 2020).

Process of Study Selection – PRISMA

Figure 1.

PRISMA Method Flow Diagram



Note. The diagram describes the process of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies according to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Own elaboration based on Page et al. (2021).

The PRISMA selection process began with 86 records identified through four scientific databases. After removing 13 duplicate records and 7 records excluded for other reasons, 66 records were screened by title and abstract. During this stage, 34 records were excluded, resulting in 32 reports sought for retrieval. Of these, 2 reports were not retrieved, leaving 30 full-text studies assessed for eligibility. Finally, 15 studies were excluded after eligibility assessment, and 15 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis.

The numerical sequence of the PRISMA flow diagram is therefore as follows: 86 records identified → 13 duplicate records removed → 7 records removed for other reasons → 66 records screened → 34 records excluded → 32 reports sought for retrieval → 2 reports not retrieved → 30 full-text studies assessed for eligibility → 15 studies excluded → 15 studies included in the qualitative synthesis.

d) Sources and Sample

The documentary sources selected for this study were scientific articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. These databases were selected because they contain peer-reviewed scientific literature relevant to education, educational leadership, teaching practices, organizational management, and educational innovation.

The review covered scientific publications published between January 2020 and June 19, 2026. The initial search produced 86 potentially relevant records, while the application of the PRISMA screening and eligibility process resulted in a final sample of 15 peer-reviewed scientific articles.

The unit of analysis therefore consisted of the 15 scientific studies selected after applying the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. These studies addressed at least one direct relationship among educational leadership, teacher empowerment, teacher autonomy, teacher innovation, school climate, or transformation of learning environments.

e) Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria established for the systematic review were the following:

- Scientific articles published between 2020 and 2026.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles.



- Publications written in English or Spanish.
- Studies related to educational or school leadership.
- Research addressing teacher empowerment, teacher autonomy, participation, motivation, innovation, or professional development.
- Studies examining the relationship between leadership practices and learning environments, school improvement, educational quality, or innovation.
- Articles with accessible full text and sufficient methodological information.
- Empirical studies, systematic reviews, and relevant theoretical studies directly connected to the study variables.

The **exclusion criteria** were:

- Studies published before 2020.
- Theses, dissertations, conference abstracts, editorials, institutional reports, or non-peer-reviewed documents.
- Duplicate publications.
- Articles unrelated to educational contexts.
- Studies focused exclusively on student leadership without considering teachers or school leadership.
- Publications without accessible full text.
- Studies that did not provide sufficient methodological information or relevant findings regarding the research objective.

The use of explicit eligibility criteria improves the consistency of study selection and reduces subjective decisions during systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021; Ghamrawi et al., 2025).

f) General Procedure

The general procedure began with the definition of the research objective and the identification of the three central dimensions of the study: strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and transformation of learning environments. Subsequently, keywords and Boolean combinations were defined and applied to the selected databases.

All retrieved references were organized and checked to identify duplicate records. Titles and abstracts were then screened according to the established eligibility criteria. Articles that passed this stage were reviewed in full text to determine their final inclusion.



The selected studies were recorded in an analytical matrix containing bibliographic, methodological, and substantive information. The evidence was then classified according to the central variables and compared to identify relationships, recurring findings, and theoretical contributions. Finally, a qualitative synthesis was developed to explain how educational leadership strategies are related to teacher empowerment and the transformation of learning environments.

The entire selection procedure was documented using the **PRISMA 2020 flow model**, ensuring a transparent sequence from the initial identification of studies to the final sample. This systematic organization strengthens the traceability, transparency, and reproducibility of the review process (Page et al., 2021; Ghamrawi et al., 2025).

4. RESULTS

The systematic literature review included a final sample of 15 scientific articles published between 2020 and 2026, selected from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. The studies were analyzed according to the three main variables established in this research: strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and transformation of learning environments. The findings showed that these variables are strongly interconnected, particularly through leadership practices based on collaboration, autonomy, innovation, shared decision-making, and professional support.

The methodological quality assessment showed that the empirical studies generally presented adequate methodological characteristics, although several were limited by cross-sectional and observational designs. Narrative and conceptual studies contributed relevant theoretical evidence but showed greater limitations regarding reproducibility and empirical support. The summarized methodological appraisal of the 15 included studies is presented in Table 2.

The reviewed literature indicates that strategic educational leadership plays an important role in creating favorable organizational conditions for educational improvement. Transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership were the most frequently addressed approaches among the selected studies. Hojeij (2024) highlights that different educational leadership models can promote creativity, innovation, and institutional transformation, while O'Shea (2021) identifies a positive relationship between distributed leadership and teachers' use of innovative teaching practices. Likewise, Schmitz et al. (2023)



demonstrate that transformational leadership can support teachers in integrating digital technologies into teaching when school leaders establish clear goals and provide appropriate professional support.

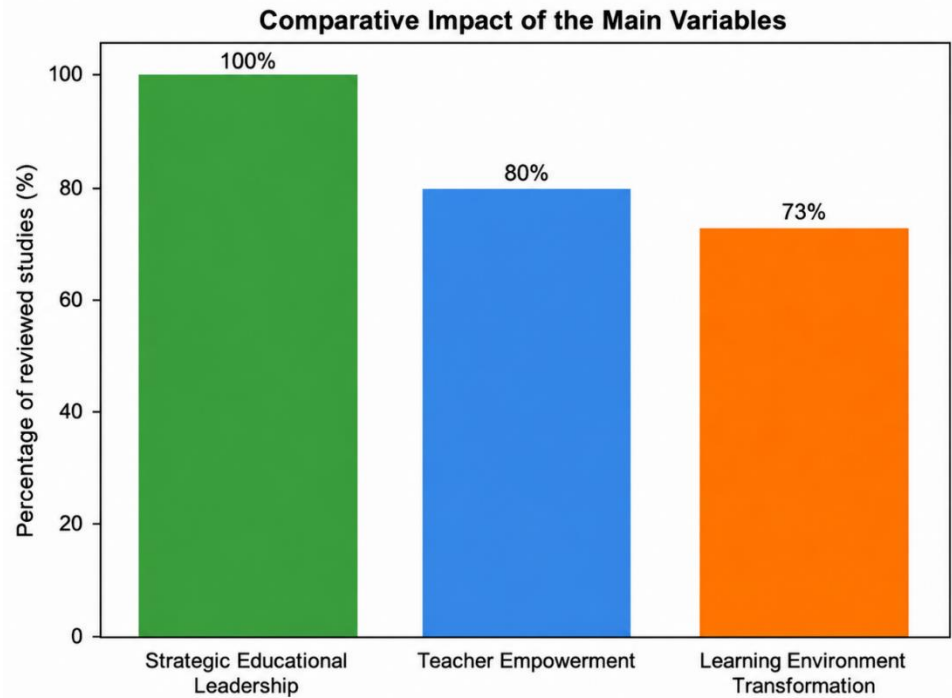
Regarding teacher empowerment, the findings consistently emphasize the importance of autonomy, participation in decision-making, professional responsibility, and leadership opportunities. Wang et al. (2024) found that transformational leadership is related to teacher autonomy and that organizational climate and teacher empowerment are relevant factors in this relationship. Similarly, Mokhlis and Abdullah (2025) reported a strong positive effect of teacher empowerment on the innovation climate of schools, with empowerment explaining approximately 50% of the variability in innovation climate in their study. These findings suggest that teachers who perceive greater autonomy and institutional support are more likely to participate actively in educational improvement and innovation.

The third variable, transformation of learning environments, was mainly associated with innovation, collaboration, classroom interaction, technology integration, and school climate. Abuhassira et al. (2024) examined transformational leadership in secondary schools and identified its relevance for classroom interaction and teaching processes. In addition, Schmitz et al. (2023) showed that leadership practices can facilitate more meaningful uses of digital technology by teachers, while O'Shea (2021) linked distributed leadership with innovative instructional practices. Therefore, the reviewed evidence suggests that transforming learning environments involves not only technological resources but also supportive leadership, collaborative work, teacher autonomy, and institutional conditions that facilitate innovation. Overall, the synthesis of the 15 selected studies shows a common pattern educational leadership is consistently associated with organizational conditions related to teacher empowerment, while teacher empowerment is associated with more innovative and collaborative learning environments. Distributed leadership encourages the sharing of responsibilities and professional participation, whereas transformational leadership promotes shared goals, motivation, innovation, and professional support. Nadeem (2024) similarly identifies distributed leadership as an important mechanism for school improvement because leadership responsibilities can be shared among different members of the educational community.

Figure 2.



Conceptual Relationships among Strategic Educational Leadership, Teacher Empowerment, and Transformation of Learning Environments



Note. The figure represents a conceptual model derived from the qualitative synthesis of the reviewed literature. The arrows indicate relationships consistently identified across the included studies and should not be interpreted as evidence of direct causality or statistical mediation. Strategic educational leadership was frequently associated with teacher autonomy, participation, collaboration, and innovation, while teacher empowerment was associated with more participatory, flexible, and innovative learning environments. Own elaboration based on the reviewed studies.

Table 3.
Characteristics of the Studies Included in the Systematic Review

Author / Year	Country or educational context	Design	Participants / Unit of analysis	Leadership approach	Main finding
O'Shea (2021)	Educational context not specified in	Empirical quantitative study	Teachers educational setting	/ Distributed leadership	Distributed leadership was positively related to



Author / Year	Country or educational context	Design	Participants / Unit of analysis	Leadership approach	Main finding
	the manuscript				teachers’ implementation of innovative teaching practices. Transformational leadership supported teachers’ integration of digital technologies by establishing shared goals and organizational support. Leadership styles were associated with school climate dimensions such as trust, shared beliefs, organizational rules, and encouragement of initiatives. Transformational leadership contributed to classroom interaction, communication, and teaching-learning processes.
Schmitz et al. (2023)	School context	Empirical study	quantitative Teachers	Transformational leadership	
Veletić al. (2023)	School context	Empirical study	Teachers and principals	Principal leadership styles	
Abuhassira et al. (2024)	UAE secondary schools	Empirical study	Secondary- school educational community	Transformational leadership	
Al-Zu’bi et al. (2024)	Primary- school context	Empirical study	Primary- school teachers	Educational leadership / school environment	A healthy educational environment was associated with collaborative culture,



Author / Year	Country or educational context	Design	Participants / Unit of analysis	Leadership approach	Main finding
					institutional goals, teacher commitment, and attention to student performance.
					Contemporary educational leadership approaches
Hojeij (2024)	Educational settings	Narrative review	literature Published literature	Instructional, distributed and transformational leadership	can promote creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship in educational environments.
					Transformational leadership was associated with
Wang et al. (2024)	Educational context	Empirical study	quantitative Teachers	Transformational leadership	teacher autonomy, with empowerment and organizational climate playing relevant roles.
					Teacher empowerment
					positively influenced
Yao et al. (2024)	Educational context	Empirical study	quantitative Teachers	Teacher empowerment / leadership-related organizational processes	professionalism through trust among colleagues and affective commitment.
					Shared and
Teng et al. (2024)	Educational context	Empirical study	Teachers	Distributed leadership	distributed leadership supported teacher empowerment and the



Author / Year	Country or educational context	Design	Participants / Unit of analysis	Leadership approach	Main finding
					development of innovative teaching practices.
Davis (2024)	School context	Theoretical/professional contribution	Teachers / educational organizations	Empowering leadership	Trust and professional responsibility were identified as important conditions for developing teacher agency.
Pitler (2024)	K–12 schools	Theoretical/professional contribution	K–12 educational settings	Leadership change	Teacher participation in change processes can strengthen for ownership, collaboration, continuous learning, and sustainable transformation.
Nadeem (2024)	Educational contexts	Review/conceptual study	Published educational evidence	Distributed leadership	Distributed leadership promotes school improvement by sharing leadership responsibilities among members of the educational community.
Mokhlis & Abdullah (2025)	School context	Empirical quantitative study	Teachers	Teacher empowerment	Teacher empowerment had a strong positive effect on schools' innovation climate.



Author / Year	Country or educational context	Design	Participants / Unit of analysis	Leadership approach	Main finding
Baydar & Demirci (2026)	School context	Empirical study	quantitative Teachers and school principals	Instructional leadership	Instructional leadership was associated with teacher motivation and supported professional development, collaboration, and student-focused decision-making.
Yongco (2026)	Philippine secondary schools	Empirical study	quantitative Secondary- school teachers schools	Transformational leadership / other styles	Transformational leadership was and identified as a strong predictor of teacher performance and student achievement.

Note. Characteristics were synthesized from the 15 studies included in the systematic review. When specific information regarding country, participants, or methodological characteristics was not reported in the manuscript, the corresponding educational context or unit of analysis was described using only the information available in the reviewed sources. Own elaboration.

The comparative analysis also revealed that distributed and transformational leadership were the leadership approaches most closely associated with teacher participation and educational innovation. O'Shea (2021) demonstrated that distributed leadership is related to innovative teaching practices, while Schmitz et al. (2023) showed that transformational leadership supports technology integration in schools. Furthermore, the evidence provided by Mokhlis and Abdullah (2025) reinforces the relationship between teacher empowerment and an innovative school climate.

Consequently, the results of this systematic review indicate that leadership should not be understood solely as an administrative function. Instead, effective educational leadership



operates as a mechanism for strengthening teacher participation, autonomy, collaboration, and innovation. These elements contribute to the development of learning environments that are more responsive to contemporary educational needs and capable of supporting continuous institutional improvement.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review confirm that strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and the transformation of learning environments are closely interconnected. Across the selected studies, leadership was consistently associated with institutional conditions that promote collaboration, autonomy, innovation, professional participation, and continuous improvement. This result is consistent with the findings of Hojeij (2024), who emphasizes that contemporary educational leadership models can foster innovation and organizational transformation, and with Nadeem (2024), who identifies distributed leadership as an important mechanism for improving schools through shared responsibility and collective participation.

A second important finding concerns the relationship between leadership and teacher empowerment. The reviewed studies indicate that teachers are more likely to participate actively in institutional improvement when they perceive autonomy, professional support, trust, and opportunities to influence decision-making. This finding agrees with Wang et al. (2024), who report a relationship between transformational leadership and teacher autonomy, and with Mokhlis and Abdullah (2025), who demonstrate that teacher empowerment contributes positively to the innovation climate of schools. In this sense, the evidence suggests that leadership effectiveness depends not only on the actions of school principals but also on the extent to which leadership responsibilities are shared with teachers.

The results also support the importance of distributed and transformational leadership in the development of innovative educational environments. O'Shea (2021) found that distributed leadership is positively associated with innovative teaching practices, while Schmitz et al. (2023) identified transformational leadership as a relevant factor in supporting teachers' use of digital technologies. These findings coincide with the results of the present review, in which innovation, collaboration, and professional participation repeatedly appeared as key outcomes of effective leadership practices. However, the reviewed studies also show that the



impact of leadership can vary depending on institutional context, organizational culture, available resources, and teachers' readiness to participate in change processes.

Regarding the transformation of learning environments, the review indicates that educational change extends beyond the adoption of technology. Although digital integration is an important component, the selected studies also emphasize communication, classroom interaction, school climate, collaboration, and professional support. Abuhassira et al. (2024) highlight the contribution of transformational leadership to classroom interaction, whereas Veletić et al. (2023) show that principals' leadership styles are related to dimensions of school climate and organizational quality. Therefore, transforming learning environments requires both pedagogical innovation and organizational conditions that encourage trust, participation, and shared responsibility.

Another relevant aspect is that the reviewed literature does not present educational leadership as a single uniform model. Instead, transformational, distributed, instructional, and strategic leadership approaches appear to contribute in different but complementary ways. Transformational leadership emphasizes motivation and shared vision; distributed leadership focuses on shared responsibility; instructional leadership concentrates on teaching and learning processes; and strategic leadership integrates organizational goals with long-term institutional development. This diversity suggests that educational institutions may benefit from combining leadership approaches according to their context and specific needs rather than applying a single leadership model rigidly.

From a practical perspective, the results indicate that school leaders should promote greater teacher participation in decision-making, encourage collaborative professional cultures, support innovation, and create opportunities for professional autonomy. These actions may strengthen teachers' sense of agency and contribute to more flexible and responsive learning environments. From a theoretical perspective, the review reinforces the idea that teacher empowerment can function as an important connecting element between leadership practices and educational transformation. Consequently, future research should continue examining this relationship in different educational levels, countries, and institutional contexts.

6. CONCLUSIONS



The systematic review suggests that strategic educational leadership is consistently associated with teacher empowerment and the transformation of learning environments. The selected studies consistently indicate that leadership practices based on collaboration, shared decision-making, professional support, and clear institutional goals are associated with greater teacher participation, autonomy, and innovation.

Teacher empowerment emerged as an essential component of educational improvement. Greater professional autonomy, participation in decision-making, trust, and leadership opportunities allow teachers to become active agents of institutional change. In turn, teacher empowerment is consistently associated with more collaborative, innovative, and adaptive learning environments capable of responding to contemporary educational challenges.

Future studies should expand the empirical analysis of the relationship between strategic educational leadership, teacher empowerment, and learning environment transformation using longitudinal and comparative designs. It would also be valuable to include larger samples and educational institutions from different countries, levels of education, and socioeconomic contexts to determine whether the relationships identified in this review remain consistent across diverse settings.

The importance of strategic educational leadership extends beyond school management and teacher performance. Its influence may also be connected to broader issues such as digital transformation, educational inclusion, institutional resilience, student well-being, sustainability, and educational equity. Future research could therefore analyze leadership as part of a wider ecosystem involving teachers, students, families, communities, and educational policy.

Based on current trends, educational leadership is likely to become increasingly collaborative, flexible, and technology-oriented. As schools face new social, technological, and pedagogical demands, leadership models that strengthen teacher autonomy, innovation, and collective responsibility may become increasingly important. Institutions that successfully integrate strategic leadership with teacher empowerment are therefore more likely to develop sustainable, innovative, and adaptable learning environments in the coming years.



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