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Educational Leadership Practices in the Context of Sustainable Development Goals: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This systematic review investigates the relationship between Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and educational leadership by synthesizing findings from 28 peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2024. Employing the PRISMA framework and guided by the Campbell and Cochrane Economics Methods Group protocols, the review examines dominant research trends, methodological patterns, and theoretical perspectives within the field. Results reveal a strong emphasis on socially oriented SDGs, particularly Quality Education (SDG 4), followed by Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10). Digital Learning Integration emerges as the most frequently explored thematic focus, reflecting the increasing role of technology in educational leadership, whereas Community Engagement receives comparatively limited scholarly attention. Methodologically, qualitative approaches predominate, followed by quantitative and mixed-methods designs, indicating a diverse yet uneven research landscape. Theoretical analyses show substantial reliance on transformational leadership theory, complemented by systems thinking and sustainable development frameworks, signaling growing conceptual sophistication. However, the geographic distribution of studies is skewed toward developed countries, with limited representation from developing and cross-cultural contexts. Notably, environmental sustainability and community participation remain under examined despite their centrality to the SDG agenda. These findings underscore the need for more inclusive, ecologically informed, and context-sensitive research to strengthen the role of educational leadership in advancing sustainable development.

Keywords: Educational leadership; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Sustainability in education; Social justice leadership; Digital learning integration; Transformational leadership; Systematic review; Global education

1. INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into educational leadership practices constitutes a multifaceted challenge for educational institutions globally. Although the United Nations underscores the centrality of education in advancing sustainable development, a persistent gap remains between conceptual frameworks and their practical enactment at the leadership level (Fia et al., 2022). Educational leaders frequently encounter difficulties in aligning institutional policies and operational practices with SDG targets while simultaneously sustaining academic standards and responding to localized educational demands (Ferrer-Estévez

& Chalmeta, 2021). Empirical evidence from diverse contexts, including Qatar (Zguir et al., 2021), Japan (Fiel'ardh et al., 2023), and India (Priyadarshini & Abhilash, 2020), highlights recurring challenges related to assessing the impact of SDG initiatives, building leadership capacity in sustainability-oriented practices, and managing competing institutional priorities. Comparable concerns have also been reported in Finland, where efforts to develop coherent policies linking sustainable development objectives with educational management have faced notable constraints (Balinggan, 2023).

In the Philippine context, the integration of SDGs into educational leadership is further complicated by limited resources, geographic inequities, and uneven institutional capacities, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Albert et al., 2023; Ceblano et al., 2023). Despite the growing body of literature addressing SDGs and educational leadership independently, systematic and integrative analyses examining their convergence remain scarce. Consequently, limited insight exists into the ways educational leadership practices facilitate or impede SDG attainment, as well as the theoretical frameworks that can effectively guide such integration. This gap is especially critical given the impending 2030 SDG deadline and the pivotal role of education in advancing global sustainability, underscoring the urgent need for research that clarifies how educational leadership can meaningfully contribute to sustainable development outcomes.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this systematic review is to critically synthesize and conceptualize existing empirical research on the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within educational leadership practices. In accordance with PRISMA and Campbell review standards, the study seeks to identify the SDGs most frequently addressed in educational research, examine dominant thematic foci and associated findings, and evaluate the extent to which methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, and study contexts shape current scholarly understanding of SDG implementation in education. By systematically mapping research designs, conceptual orientations, and contextual distributions, this review aims to clarify the current state of the field and identify gaps that warrant further investigation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency, methodological rigor, and replicability throughout the review process (O'Dea et al., 2021). In addition, the procedures for search strategy development, study selection, data extraction, synthesis, and quality appraisal were guided by the methodological recommendations of the Cochrane Economics Methods Group and the Campbell Collaboration, which are widely recognized for conducting systematic reviews in social science and educational research (Wang et al., 2021).

A comprehensive and structured literature search was undertaken across multiple academic databases to identify peer-reviewed studies examining the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within educational leadership contexts. Predefined inclusion and

exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies. Eligible studies were screened through a two-stage process involving title and abstract review followed by full-text assessment. Data extraction focused on key study characteristics, including publication year, geographical context, SDGs addressed, thematic focus, research design, methodological approach, theoretical framework, and principal findings.

The synthesis of evidence followed a systematic narrative approach, enabling the identification of recurring themes, methodological patterns, and theoretical orientations across studies. To enhance the reliability of findings, methodological quality and potential bias were critically appraised using criteria consistent with Cochrane and Campbell standards. The results of the selection process were documented using a PRISMA flow diagram, providing a transparent account of study identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

3.1. Search Strategy

A comprehensive and systematic literature search was conducted to identify relevant peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2024. The search was performed across two major academic databases: Web of Science and the International Database of Education Systematic Reviews (IDESR), selected for their extensive coverage of high-quality research in education and related social sciences. To enhance the breadth and completeness of the search, backward and forward snowballing techniques were employed, whereby reference lists and citation trails of included studies were examined to identify additional relevant publications. Supplementary searches were also conducted using Google Scholar to capture potentially eligible studies not indexed in the primary databases.

The search strategy was designed to ensure transparency and reproducibility. Key search terms and Boolean operators were developed based on the study objectives and systematically applied across databases. Detailed information regarding the search strings, combinations of keywords, and the number of records retrieved at each stage is provided in Appendix 1. This structured approach ensured comprehensive coverage of the literature while minimizing selection bias and enhancing methodological rigor.

3.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure methodological rigor, relevance, and the quality of evidence synthesized, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to the screening process. Studies were included in the review if they met the following criteria: (1) were published in peer-reviewed academic sources, including scholarly journals, conference proceedings, or academic books; (2) were published between 2020 and 2024 to capture contemporary research reflecting recent developments in the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within educational leadership; (3) were written in English and explicitly addressed the implementation or integration of SDGs within educational contexts; and (4) constituted original empirical research, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, or other scholarly studies that examined the application of SDG principles to school leadership or educational management practices.

Studies were excluded if they: (1) focused on SDGs in non-educational sectors or addressed sustainable development in a general context without explicit relevance to educational

leadership; (2) examined SDGs that were not directly linked to leadership practices within educational institutions; or (3) were unavailable in full-text form or inaccessible through institutional or open-access sources. These criteria were applied consistently during both the title and abstract screening stage and the full-text review stage to ensure the inclusion of studies that were methodologically robust and directly aligned with the objectives of the review.

3.3. Selection and Data Extraction

All records retrieved from the aforementioned databases were downloaded and duplicate entries were removed. Subsequently, the titles and abstracts of the remaining records were screened against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify relevant studies. A flow chart illustrating the study selection process, including the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and included, is presented in Chart 1.

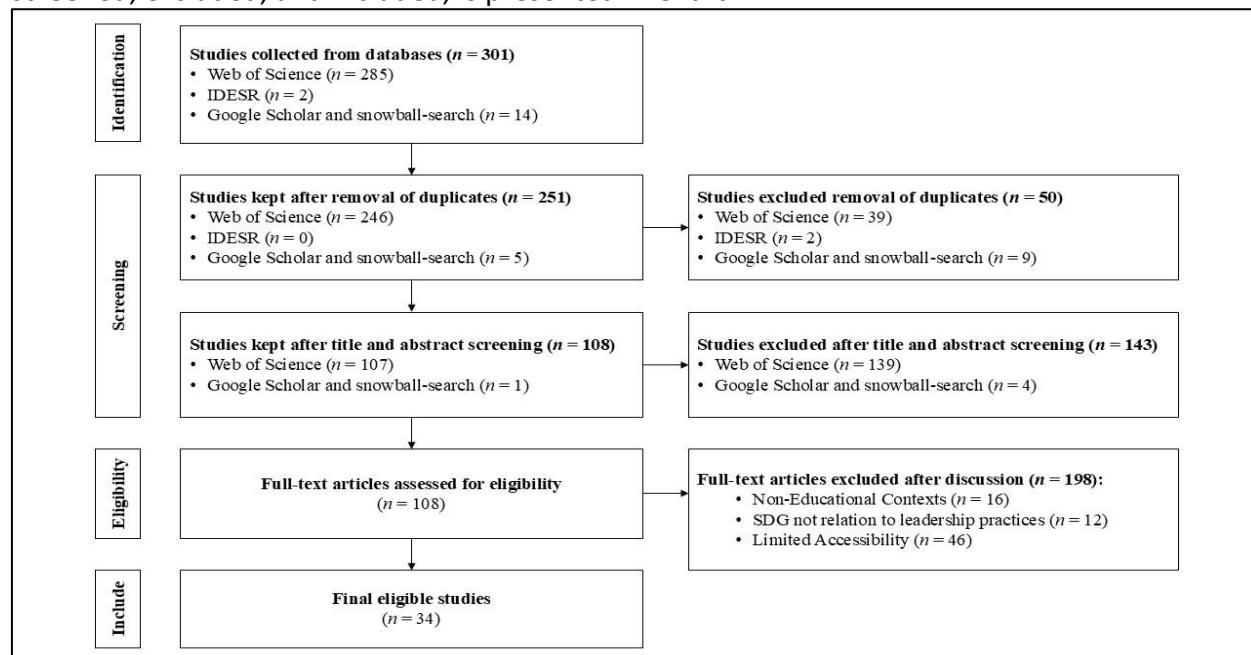


Chart 1. Flow chart depicting the study selection process for the systematic review

The study selection process began with the removal of duplicate records from the initial search results. Titles and abstracts of the remaining records were screened against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify potentially relevant studies. To ensure consistency and reliability, a random sample of both included and excluded studies from this initial screening was re-examined to verify the comparability of assessments. Full texts of studies meeting the inclusion criteria were then retrieved and evaluated in detail. Any discrepancies or uncertainties arising during the full-text assessment were resolved through discussion, and consensus was established among the researchers. The flow chart provides a visual summary of the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and ultimately included in the review, illustrating the transparency and reproducibility of the study selection procedure.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Sustainable Development Goals Addressed in Educational Research

Figure 1 presents a synthesis of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) examined across the 28 educational research articles included in this review.

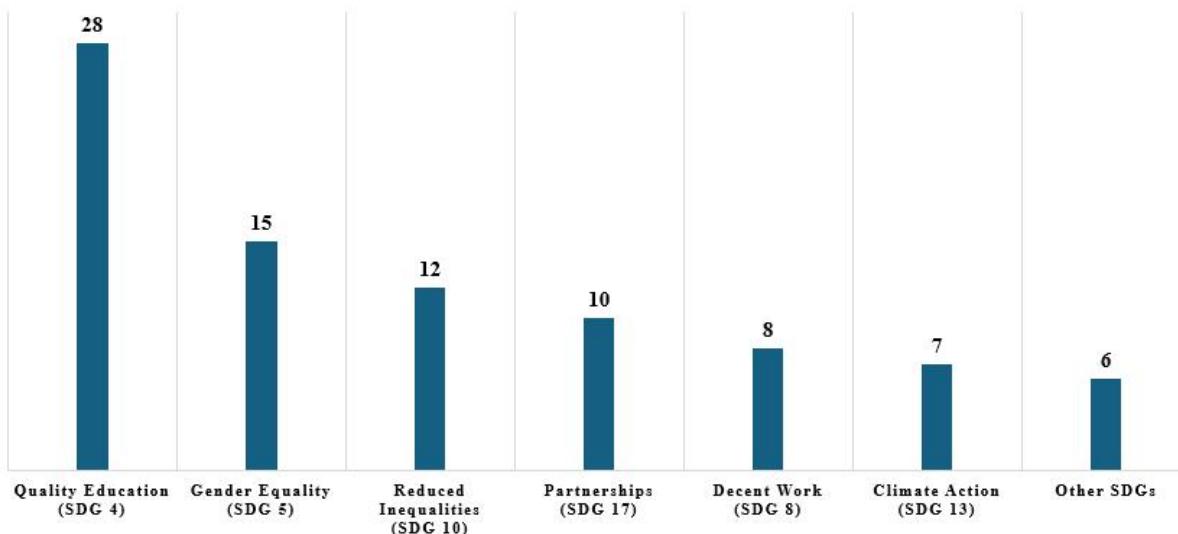


Figure 1. Sustainable Development Goals Addressed in Educational Research

The data indicate a strong emphasis on Quality Education (SDG 4) within educational research, appearing most frequently with 28 occurrences. This predominant focus aligns with Laumann et al. (2022), who identified SDG 4 as a central node connecting multiple sustainable development objectives. The prominence of Quality Education reflects the education sector's inherent alignment with this goal while also underscoring its potential to contribute to broader sustainability outcomes through targeted educational interventions.

Following SDG 4, Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) are the second and third most frequently addressed goals, with 15 and 12 occurrences, respectively. These findings corroborate research by Unterhalter et al. (2022), highlighting the interconnections between educational access, gender parity, and social equity. The focus on these equality-oriented SDGs suggests that educational leadership increasingly acknowledges its role in mitigating systemic disparities through institutional policies and practices.

In contrast, Climate Action (SDG 13) and other environmental SDGs are comparatively underrepresented, with only seven studies addressing climate-related issues. This gap reflects observations by Pizzutilo and Venezia (2021) regarding the limited incorporation of environmental sustainability into educational leadership frameworks. The underrepresentation of environmental SDGs highlights an opportunity for educational institutions to more actively integrate sustainability principles, given their capacity to foster environmental awareness and action among students.

4.2. Dominant Research Focus Areas

Figure 2 shows the synthesis of the predominant research topics on Sustainable Development Goals explored in the 28 education research articles.

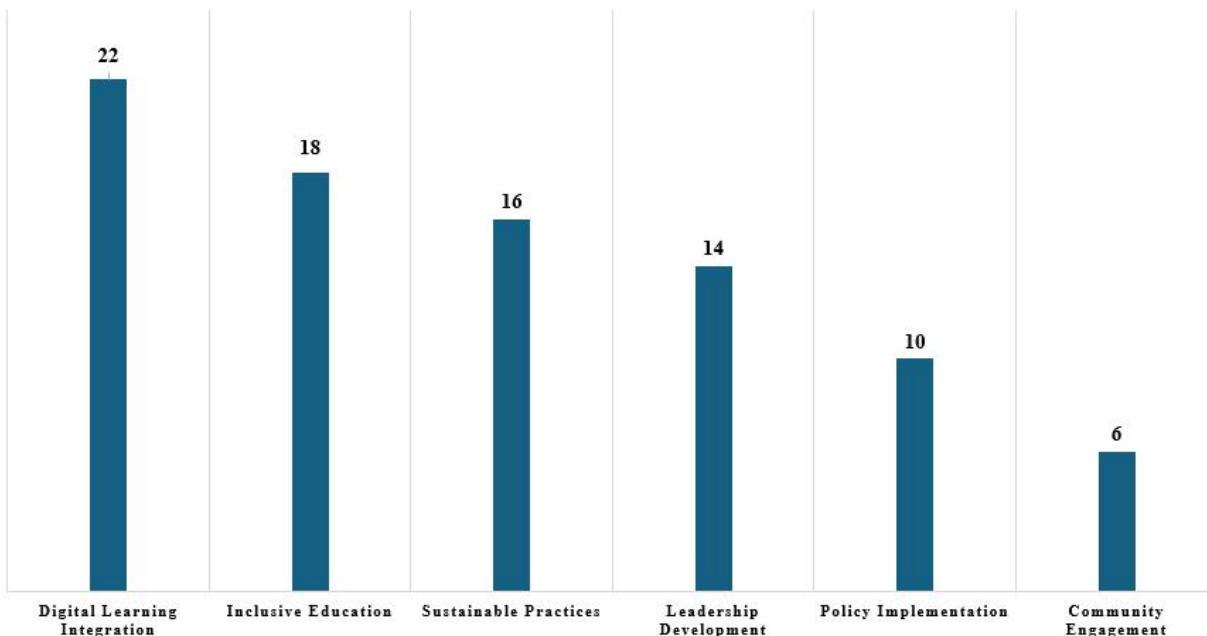


Figure 2. Dominant Research Focus Areas

The prominence of Digital Learning Integration as the most frequently examined topic, appearing in 22 studies, reflects the education sector's rapid technological transformation. This aligns with Adi Badiozaman et al. (2022), who documented the accelerated adoption of digital learning platforms in response to global educational disruptions. The high prevalence of research on digital learning indicates that educational leaders are prioritizing technological innovation while addressing challenges related to accessibility, effectiveness, and equity in digital education delivery.

Inclusive Education and Sustainable Practices emerge as the second and third most explored topics, with 18 and 16 occurrences, respectively. These findings correspond with Hajisoteriou and Sorkos (2023), who observed that educational institutions are increasingly committed to fostering inclusive learning environments and implementing sustainable operational practices. The substantial focus on these areas underscores the growing recognition among educational leaders of their responsibility to promote both social inclusion and environmental sustainability within institutional contexts.

Research on Leadership Development and Policy Implementation collectively accounts for 24 studies, highlighting ongoing efforts to strengthen institutional capacity. In contrast, Community Engagement is relatively underexplored, with only six studies addressing this topic. This gap aligns with Eweje et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of community

partnerships in advancing educational sustainability goals, and underscores the need for further research on how educational leaders can effectively engage stakeholders to support sustainable development initiatives.

4.3. Distribution of Research Methods

Figure 3 shows the synthesis of the research methods, theoretical frameworks, and research contexts in the exploration of the Sustainable Development Goals among the 28 education research articles.

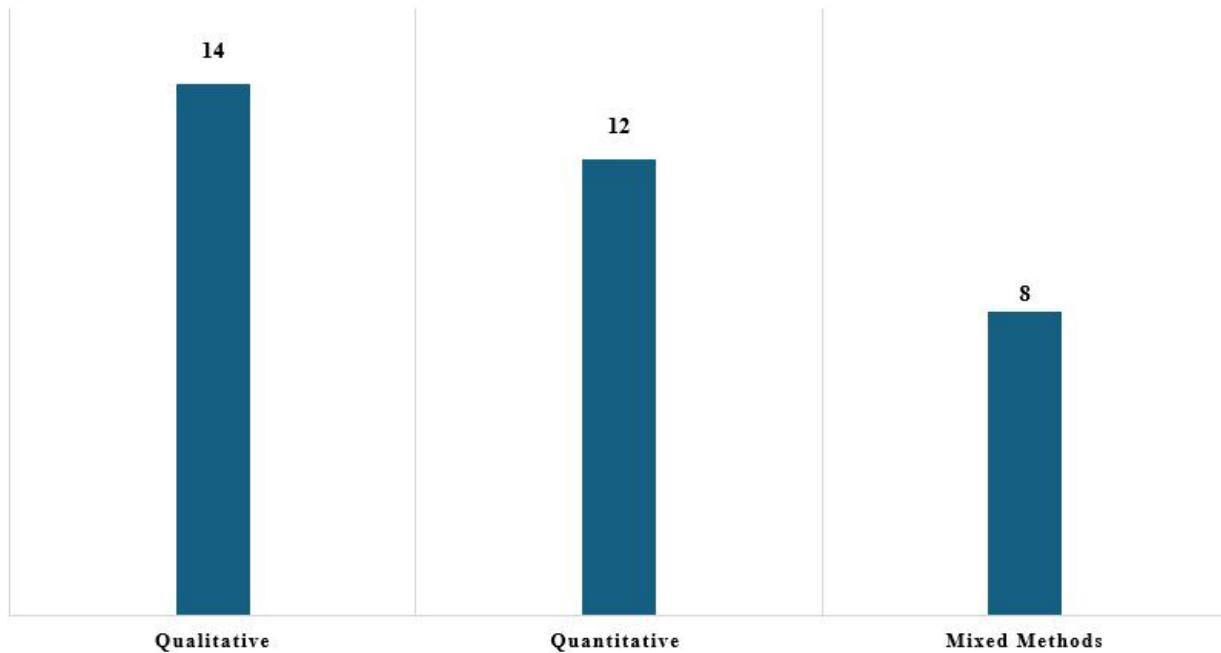


Figure 3. Distribution of Research Methods

The analysis of research methodologies reveals a predominant use of qualitative approaches (41%), indicating scholars' focus on capturing the complex and context-specific aspects of sustainable development in educational leadership. This aligns with Figueiró et al. (2022), who emphasized the value of qualitative methods in exploring the multifaceted challenges of implementing sustainability initiatives in education. Quantitative methods (35%) and mixed-methods designs (24%) are also represented, reflecting a balanced and diverse methodological landscape. Such diversity supports Caniglia et al.'s (2021) argument that methodological pluralism is essential for examining complex organizational changes and policy implementation in education.

Theoretical frameworks show a similarly sophisticated pattern. Transformational leadership theory is the most frequently applied lens (Safaruddin et al., 2023), highlighting the role of transformative approaches in driving systemic change. Complementary frameworks, including systems thinking and sustainable development theory (Green et al., 2021; Iqbal &

Piwowar-Sulej, 2022), illustrate a growing appreciation for holistic perspectives that integrate leadership practices with sustainability challenges (Sajjad et al., 2024).

Geographically, research is concentrated in developed countries (45%), with developing nations (35%) and cross-cultural studies (20%) less represented. This pattern underscores the need for greater attention to diverse contexts and how educational leadership adapts to local cultural and economic conditions to advance SDG implementation (Abo-Khalil, 2024; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The systematic review highlights distinct patterns in how Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) intersect with educational leadership practices. Quality Education (SDG 4) emerges as the most prominently addressed goal, reflecting the sector's prioritization of equitable access and improved learning outcomes. Complementary attention to Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) underscores a strong commitment within educational leadership to address social disparities and promote inclusive practices. Methodologically, the field demonstrates maturity, with a relatively balanced distribution between qualitative (41%) and quantitative (35%) approaches, alongside mixed-methods studies (24%), reflecting researchers' efforts to capture both the contextual nuances and measurable impacts of SDG-related initiatives.

Despite these advances, the review identifies notable gaps. Environmental SDGs, particularly Climate Action (SDG 13), remain underexplored, and research on community engagement is limited, signaling critical areas for further investigation. Additionally, the geographical distribution of studies is skewed toward developed countries, highlighting the need for greater representation of developing nations and cross-cultural contexts.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that educational institutions and researchers broaden their focus to incorporate environmental sustainability initiatives, strengthen community partnerships, and design studies that address diverse cultural and economic contexts. Furthermore, educational leaders should adopt integrated theoretical frameworks that combine transformational leadership, systems thinking, and sustainable development theory to more effectively navigate the complex challenges of SDG implementation. Collectively, these strategies aim to foster a more comprehensive, inclusive, and context-sensitive approach to advancing sustainable development through educational leadership.

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