

## LEADERSHIP STYLES AND PRACTICES OF SENIOR LEADERS IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

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**Abstract:** School leadership shapes teaching, learning, and the daily life of a school. It sets direction, supports staff, and holds the routine steady when change arrives. Yet the same role looks different across places and times, and no single model fits all schools. This concept paper explores how leadership styles such as transformational, instructional, distributed, inclusive, and strategic, connect to the concrete practices that senior leaders use, like mentoring teachers, supervising instruction, using data, and building trust with families and communities. The focus is on senior leaders in school settings and on how styles become practices that influence outcomes for teachers, students, and the wider school culture. The paper draws only on past studies to build a clear conceptual argument, blending evidence from multiple countries and contexts (Harris & Jones, 2023; Abdullah, Razak, & Hoque, 2022; Parveen, Quang Bao Tran, Kumar, & Shah, 2022; Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021). It does not report findings from new fieldwork. Instead, it offers an integrated discussion that shows why leaders rarely rely on a single style and how they mix approaches to match local need (Agyeman & Aphane, 2024; Tawiah, 2022). The contribution is a simple, usable way to think about linkage: leadership styles guide the mindset, leadership practices carry the action, and together they shape school outcomes (Adams, Mohamed, Moosa, Shareefa, & Tan, 2025; Berhanu, 2025; Barth & Tsemach, 2025). The paper proposes a conceptual path that can inform leadership standards, training, and future research design, while keeping attention on cultural fit and system goals in places like Malaysia and across the Global South (Abdullah et al., 2022; Kunalan, Ali, Ibrahim, & Sidek, 2022; Vorontsova & Dakhari, 2024).

**Keywords:** School Leadership, Leadership Styles, Senior Leaders, Leadership Practices, School Settings

## Introduction

Leadership in schools matters because it gives shape to everyday work. It sets a tone for learning, brings people together, and turns policy into action in classrooms. In many systems, leadership links teacher growth, student success, and the health of the school as a community. This is true in stable times and even more in periods of rapid change. Senior leaders, such as principals, deputy principals, and senior assistants, sit at the junction of policy demands, teacher needs, and parent hopes. They must care for quality teaching, student well-being, and a safe climate while also stewarding resources and building the culture that holds staff together (Harris & Jones, 2023; Abdullah et al., 2022). The craft of leadership is not abstract. It is the visible set of choices that guide curriculum, guide assessment, and guide people through conflict and change. In reality, the same title can hide very different daily work from school to school. A principal in a rural area may lean on community ties; a deputy principal in a large urban school may rely more on systems and routines. Across contexts, the thread is the same: someone must translate vision into practice and help others do their best work.

Leadership style and leadership practice belong together, but they are not the same thing. Style is the leader's stance. It is the pattern of behaviour and the values that sit behind decisions. Practice is what leaders do, step by step, to move a school forward. A style without practice has no grip; a practice without a clear style can feel hollow. The research record shows strong interest in styles like transformational, instructional, distributed, inclusive, participative, authentic, and strategic leadership. Each aims at a different lever for change, and each may suit a different challenge or culture (Harris & Jones, 2023; Vorontsova & Dakhari, 2024). Yet no single model works in all places or for all problems. Schools are complex, and context matters. Culture, policy, resources, and community trust shape what a leader can do and how staff will respond (Agyeman & Aphane, 2024; Tawiah, 2022). The aim of this concept paper is to bring these strands together. It sets out a clear, simple frame that links style to practice and then to outcomes. It also draws on work from Malaysia, Ghana, Pakistan, South Africa, Ethiopia, Israel, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Switzerland to show how context bends the same idea into new shapes (Abdullah et al., 2022; Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021; Parveen et al., 2022; Adams et al., 2025; Barth & Tsemach, 2025; Hernandez, Mendoza, & Pacheco, 2023; Wardana, Sudirman, Rachman, Paramansyah, & Ramli, 2024; Ruloff & Petko, 2025). The goal is not to pick a winner but to show how senior leaders mix and match styles and turn them into practice in ways that make sense for their schools.

## Problem Statement

The body of research on school leadership is large, but it is spread out across many strands. Many studies focus on one leadership style at a time and show links to one set of outcomes. This helps, but it also leads to narrow debates. It is common to find clear claims for the value of transformational leadership or instructional leadership or distributed leadership. It is less common to see how a leader mixes styles to meet different needs in a single school year or even in a single week. The field needs a more joined view that does not separate style and practice. A leader's stance shapes the choice of action, and a leader's actions carry the stance into daily life. Without this link, the advice to schools can sound tidy but not useful (Harris & Jones, 2023). A simple frame that binds styles, practices, and outcomes would help leaders plan, help systems train, and help researchers test the right questions.

There is also a gap between theory and the work that happens in schools every day. Professional standards for school leaders often list values and high-level skills, but they may not show how style becomes practice in context. In Malaysia, official standards press for high-performing

principals and point to blended leadership with both instructional and distributed elements, yet many schools still use older, more administrative habits that do not fully support teacher learning or shared decision-making (Abdullah et al., 2022). In South Africa, leaders face stark resource gaps and must balance democratic ideals with the need for strong instructional oversight; finding this balance calls for a clear map from style to day-to-day practice (Agyeman & Aphane, 2024). In Ghana and Pakistan, studies note the pull of local culture and policy on leadership choices. This suggests that the same labels travel, but the work looks different once it lands in a school (Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021; Parveen et al., 2022). The present concept paper addresses this by setting out how styles can guide a menu of practices that are sensitive to context.

A second challenge is that many claims about leadership stay at the level of broad hopes. Leaders are urged to “build a vision,” “empower teachers,” and “engage parents.” These are worthy calls, but the bridge from call to action is often thin. Leaders need to know what practices to use and when to use them. For example, if a leader seeks to build a culture of learning among staff, what is the practice path? Options include structured coaching, peer observation, data review meetings, or lesson study. Style can guide the choice and the tone of each option. An instructional stance might stress observation cycles linked to curriculum goals, while a distributed stance might build teacher leadership teams that co-design the work. An inclusive stance will ensure that all voices are present, including special education teachers and newer staff (Adams et al., 2025; Azar & Subramaniam, 2023). A simple but rich map would help leaders choose and sequence these practices and explain the choices to staff and parents.

A final issue is that policy and training sometimes move faster than the conceptual base that should support them. Ministries urge innovation, digital change, and inclusive practice. These are important aims, but leaders must know how to align style and practice to reach them. The push for digital transformation, for instance, needs more than devices; it needs a leadership blend that sets clear goals, supports teacher learning, and builds safe spaces to try and fail (Ruloff & Petko, 2025). The same is true for inclusive education and for school safety in high-risk contexts (Adams et al., 2025; Kunalan et al., 2022). Without a shared conceptual link from style to practice to outcome, training may talk past daily needs, and evaluation may misread what leaders do well. This concept paper responds by offering a simple chain, styles inform practices; practices shape outcomes, and by anchoring that chain in evidence from multiple settings.

Hence, this research is necessary now because schools worldwide are entering a period of rapid and overlapping pressures that demand clearer leadership guidance. Post-pandemic recovery, digital transformation, rising expectations for inclusive education, and shifting community demands have placed senior leaders at the centre of complex instructional, emotional, and organisational challenges. Yet leadership frameworks in many systems, including Malaysia, remain fragmented, with limited integration between leadership styles and the daily practices leaders must enact. As ministries update standards and schools navigate new reforms, the absence of a simple and actionable model creates uncertainty for training, evaluation, and day-to-day decision-making. A coherent style-to-practice framework is therefore timely to support leaders in responding effectively to current and emerging school realities.

### Significance of the Study

This concept paper matters because it closes a long-standing split in the leadership literature: style is often discussed without the practices that carry it, and practices are listed without a clear style behind them. The model offered here binds both in a simple chain and does so across contexts where schools face very different pressures. According to Harris and Jones (2023), post-pandemic schooling has amplified the need for forms of leadership that are instructional, distributed, and system-oriented at the same time. The present synthesis answers that need by showing how transformational, instructional, distributed, inclusive, participative, authentic, and strategic stances can be combined and then turned into daily acts such as coaching, data meetings, and stakeholder work. It is timely for digital change as well: work on Swiss schools shows that principal goals and transformational habits shape the depth of technology adoption, not only its presence (Ruloff & Petko, 2025). In Malaysia, national blueprints and competency standards push leaders to blend instructional and distributed approaches; the study by Abdullah, Razak, and Hoque (2022) links these expectations to concrete practice and assessment tools. Inclusive education also sits at the centre of current reform; evidence from Malaysia confirms that inclusive leadership builds teacher optimism and collaboration, which then supports classroom change for diverse learners (Adams et al., 2025). Globally, the growth of leadership research shows momentum but also fragmentation, and a framework that ties styles to observable routines helps to organise that growth into usable knowledge (Vorontsova & Dakhari, 2024). The model therefore gives a shared language for systems that want coherent training, for school leaders who need a map, and for researchers who want testable paths across cultures.

The value is practical as well as theoretical. The model helps ministries and training institutes convert broad standards into clear, learnable routines and into fairer evaluation. It supports leadership preparation in Malaysia by aligning SKKSM and KOMPAS 2.0 with a traceable logic from stance to practice to outcome (Abdullah et al., 2022). It also travels well. Studies from Ghana, Pakistan, South Africa, Indonesia, Israel, and Ethiopia show that styles shift with culture and policy, but the work still moves through a set of practices that schools recognise, supervision, collaboration, data use, and engagement (Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021; Parveen et al., 2022; Agyeman & Aphane, 2024; Wardana et al., 2024; Barth & Tsemach, 2025; Berhanu, 2025). This concept paper offers a way to compare those practices fairly, to name mediators such as academic optimism in inclusive settings (Adams et al., 2025), and to explain why an autocratic stance may lift teacher performance in one context while a democratic or participative stance may be better for parent partnership in another (Parveen et al., 2022; Barth & Tsemach, 2025). In short, it provides a lean framework that connects the aims of reform, the craft of leadership, and the outcomes that communities care about, teacher growth, student learning, school climate, and trust, without forcing one model on all schools.

### Literature Review

#### Theoretical Foundations of Leadership in Education

Leadership theory in education often begins with clear families of ideas. Transformational leadership seeks to lift motivation and build shared vision. It asks teachers to see themselves as part of a larger story and uses trust and inspiration to drive change (Harris & Jones, 2023). Instructional leadership focuses on teaching and learning. It turns most attention to curriculum, assessment, and the craft of teaching, with the aim of improving classroom practice at scale (Abdullah et al., 2022). Distributed leadership shares tasks and authority to build a wider base of decision-making. It views leadership as a property of the organisation more than a single

person (Harris & Jones, 2023). Inclusive leadership keeps equity at the centre and works to remove barriers so that all students and teachers can take part and succeed (Adams et al., 2025). Participative and authentic leadership highlight voice, ethical conduct, and transparency as drivers of trust and buy-in (Barth & Tsemach, 2025). Strategic leadership sets long-term direction and aligns resources and structures to that direction (Kunalan et al., 2022; Maqbool, Zafeer, Zeng, Mohammad, Khassawneh, & Wu, 2023). These styles overlap, and in practice many leaders blend them.

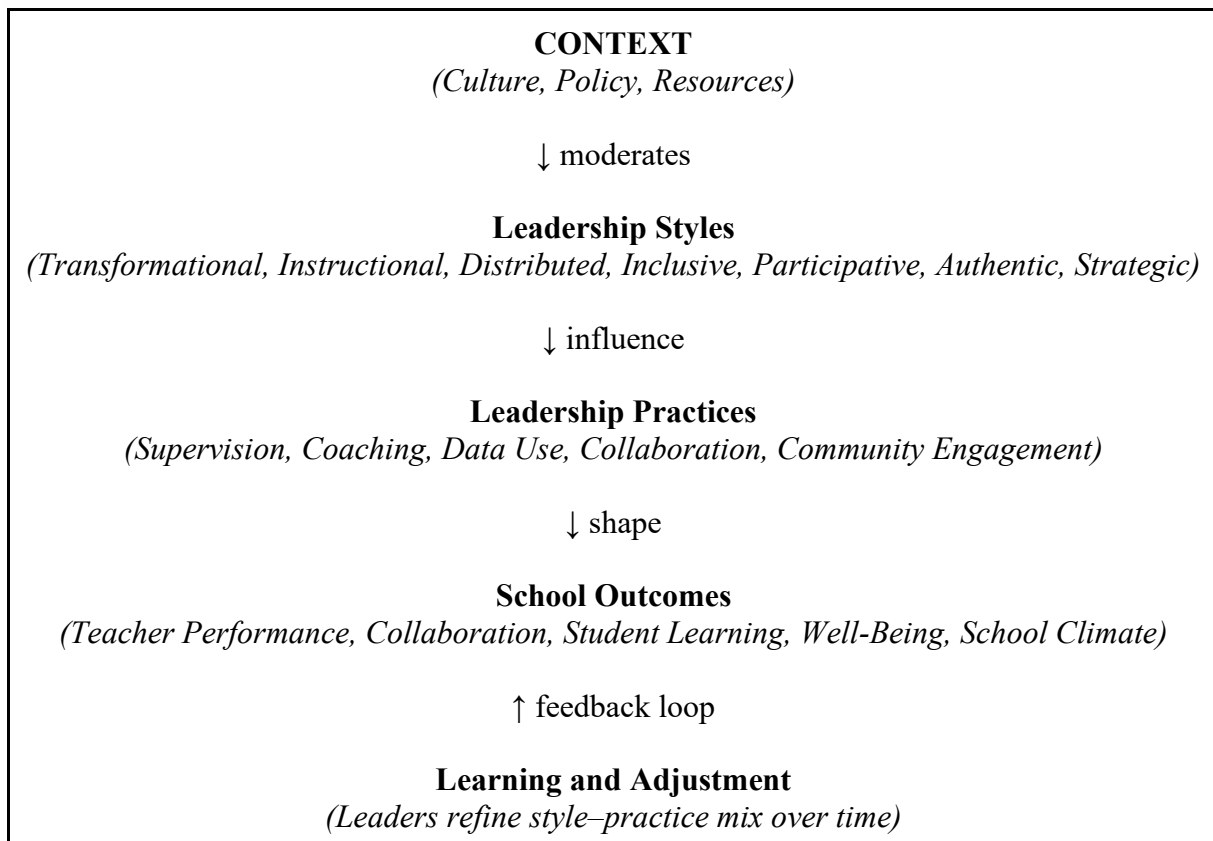
Across systems, the strongest synthesis work argues against a search for one best style. The field shows that leadership is relational, contextual, and adaptive (Harris & Jones, 2023). In Ghanaian colleges of education, for example, transformational leadership appears as the most common stance across settings, with transactional and laissez-faire less present; the point is not only which style is used but how it holds across different zones and locations and how it fits culture (Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021). In Pakistan, studies in secondary schools show that leadership style can have a strong statistical link to teacher performance and that local norms about hierarchy and authority shape which style is common and which style works best (Parveen et al., 2022). In Malaysia, the policy frame presses for a blend of instructional and distributed leadership, pushing beyond older administrative habits (Abdullah et al., 2022). In short, theory gives a menu; context sets the table.

The theoretical basis of the conceptual model presented in this paper should have a clearer theoretical grounding. Although the current theories discuss different styles of leadership, they do not necessarily show how style is transformed into practice and vice versa. The model relies on three theoretical foundations in order to reinforce this connection. To begin with, Contingency Theory confirms that leadership effectiveness is conditional and thus the focus of the model is adaptive blending of styles. Second, the Social Learning Theory is a theory that leaders can use to influence the behaviour of teachers by modelling, coaching, and interpersonal routines, which supports the importance of observable practices. Third, the Distributed Cognition Theory locates leadership as a collective organisational process, which underlies the concept in the model that practices circulate through teams and not between individual people. Collectively, these theories are able to form a cohesive foundation: leadership position (style), routines performed (practice), and school outcomes (outcomes) functions as a coherent chain that is context-dependent and influenced by learning together.

Numbers from past work help show the pattern. In Ghana, transformational leadership was rated higher than transactional and far above laissez-faire on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, with mean differences that held across college zones and locations, and with no significant gaps by setting, zone, or location (Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021). In Pakistan, leadership styles together explained a large share of variance in teacher performance, with a strong positive weight for autocratic leadership, a small positive link for democratic leadership, and a negative link for laissez-faire (Parveen et al., 2022). In Malaysia, democratic leadership explained a notable share of teachers' emotional well-being, while other styles showed weaker or non-significant links to emotional and psychometric needs (Hoque & Raya, 2023). These figures do not end the debate, but they show that style matters and that its effects vary by culture and by the outcome that is measured. Cross-country comparison suggests that leaders work under different constraints and draw on different traditions, and those conditions shape both style and practice.



Bibliometric work also shows a growth in the field. A review found a steep rise in publications that combine leadership and education across two decades, with large growth in research on management and education over the same span (Vorontsova & Dakhari, 2024). This growth has helped refine categories like distributed leadership and teacher leadership and given new space to emergent concerns such as social-emotional leadership after the pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2023; Vorontsova & Dakhari, 2024). At the same time, gaps remain: the link from style to concrete daily practices is not always made explicit, and the mix of styles that leaders use across tasks is often underdescribed. This review turns to those gaps in the next sections.



**Figure 1: Theoretical Framework**

### **Leadership Practices of Senior School Leaders**

Leadership practice is the craft that turns stance into action. Instructional supervision, professional learning, data use, collaboration, and community engagement are central areas of work (Abdullah et al., 2022). Professional learning communities sit at the core for many schools; they make space for peer observation, coaching, and joint planning. In Malaysia, a case study showed how two principals used meetings, observations, teacher coaching, and small-scale inquiry to build such communities, but also faced budget limits, time pressure, and resistance to new practices (Azar & Subramaniam, 2023). In systems that seek inclusive education, leaders build structures for teacher collaboration and set norms that uphold fairness and participation for all learners; these choices depend on a leader's style, but they are visible in the routines adopted by the school (Adams et al., 2025). Where schools face risk and instability, strategic alignment, adaptability, and wise resource use are essential; senior leaders must match long-term direction with fast adjustments on the ground (Kunalan et al., 2022).

Across the studies, several practice areas recur. First, supervision and coaching link directly to instructional leadership. They bring focus to curriculum and assessment and support teachers to improve the craft of teaching. Second, data-informed planning helps leaders and teams see patterns in attendance, progress, and behaviour and adjust teaching and support. Third, collaboration builds shared responsibility and spreads leadership beyond the principal. Fourth, communication with families and communities helps align expectations and strengthens trust (Barth & Tsemach, 2025; Abdullah et al., 2022). In the Philippines, an emphasis on innovative thinking and strategic action among school heads supported sound managerial and supervisory work, but the study also flagged a tension: a strong pull toward long-term strategy may compete with the time leaders have for hands-on instructional support (Hernandez et al., 2023). In Indonesia, leadership style and organisational culture, taken together, explained a sizable share of teacher performance; this points to practices that foster climate and teamwork as well as classroom guidance (Wardana et al., 2024). These examples show that practice is where leadership is felt. The same style will often produce a different mix of practices across contexts because constraints, culture, and policy shape what is possible.

Numbers in this practice space help sharpen the view. In Malaysia, democratic leadership accounted for a substantial part of the variance in teachers' emotional outcomes, while correlations to other behavioural domains were weaker or non-significant (Hoque & Raya, 2023). In Indonesia, leadership style alone explained a quarter of the variance in teacher performance, school culture explained a slightly larger share, and both together explained more than a third (Wardana et al., 2024). In Pakistan, strategic and instructional leadership showed strong associations with sustained academic excellence, with strategic leadership ranked highest by teachers (Maqbool et al., 2023). Across these settings, practice appears to be the hinge: it is the channel through which style acts, and it is the place where culture and policy turn general ideas into local action.

### **Integrating Styles and Practices**

A core message across the studies is that leaders blend styles. Transformational leadership may set the vision and build collective purpose. Instructional leadership may then guide how to reach that vision in classrooms. Distributed leadership may spread the work and help the school hold gains over time (Harris & Jones, 2023). In Ghana, successful turnaround principals combined transformational, instructional, situational, servant, and distributed elements, and used team-based work, clear vision, and steady communication to shift culture and performance (Tawiah, 2022). In South Africa, leaders mixed democratic, instructional, and transformational approaches, adjusting to the needs of urban, township, or rural schools, and used Ubuntu values to keep relationships strong (Agyeman & Aphane, 2024). In Malaysia, policy urges a judicious mix of instructional and distributed leadership, and the best-described practices align with this blend, like building professional learning communities while keeping a sharp eye on teaching quality (Abdullah et al., 2022; Azar & Subramaniam, 2023).

Several studies link style to specific practice effects with numbers that help guide comparison. In Israel, participative and authentic leadership each made a measurable contribution to teachers' positive attitudes toward parent involvement, while transformational leadership alone did not predict those attitudes in that sample; this suggests that engaging teachers in decisions and acting with transparency has a distinct effect on partnership with families (Barth & Tsemach, 2025). In Malaysia, inclusive leadership predicted teacher collaboration both directly and through teacher academic optimism; the indirect path was larger, pointing to optimism as a bridge from leadership to teamwork (Adams et al., 2025). In Ethiopia, pedagogical leadership

had a moderate positive link to teacher performance and explained a meaningful share of its variance, while some demographic factors influenced perceptions more than outcomes (Berhanu, 2025). Together, these results show that style matters most when it moves through the right practice channel for the outcome at hand. If the goal is stronger parent partnership, participative and authentic practices may be the lever. If the goal is teacher collaboration, inclusive practices that build efficacy and trust may be the lever. If the goal is improved teaching, instructional supervision and coaching may be the lever.

Cross-country comparison adds depth. In Pakistan, an autocratic stance aligned with better teacher performance within that context and within the measured domains (Parveen et al., 2022). In Ghana, transformational leadership was the most common and showed stable patterns across regions (Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021). In Malaysia, democratic and inclusive approaches linked to teacher emotion and collaboration, while national policy supports blended instructional and distributed practice (Hoque & Raya, 2023; Adams et al., 2025; Abdullah et al., 2022). In Indonesia, leadership and culture together shaped teacher performance at scale (Wardana et al., 2024). These differences show that the same labels travel but the fit depends on history, governance, and social norms. The common thread is the need to match style with practice and with the outcome sought.

### **Emerging Trends and Contextual Factors**

Three trends call for attention. First, digital transformation requires leaders who can set clear goals for technology use, build teacher capacity, and sustain a culture of safe experimentation. Case work in Switzerland shows that principals with strong educational goals and a transformational stance use collaboration and shared processes to support digital change, while a purely task-focused stance may fall short when deeper shifts are needed (Ruloff & Petko, 2025). Second, inclusive education is not a side project but a values base that shapes every leadership choice. Work from Malaysia shows that inclusive leadership builds teacher optimism and collaboration, which in turn support classroom adaptation for diverse learners (Adams et al., 2025). Third, post-pandemic recovery places fresh value on distributed leadership, professional inquiry, and system leadership that connects schools and builds capacity across networks (Harris & Jones, 2023).

Each trend interacts with culture. In Malaysia, national blueprints and competency standards push for instructional and distributed blends and tie leadership to equity and high performance (Abdullah et al., 2022). In South Africa, Ubuntu values help ground participatory and relational work even where resources are thin (Agyeman & Aphane, 2024). In Ghana, stable patterns of transformational leadership across locations point to a culture that values vision and motivation (Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021). In Pakistan and Indonesia, effects of strategic, autocratic, and cultural leadership sit within systems with strong administrative traditions; practice must adjust to both policy and local norms (Parveen et al., 2022; Maqbool et al., 2023; Wardana et al., 2024). The emerging lesson is simple: trend-aware leadership must be context-aware leadership. A concept that links styles to practices and outcomes helps leaders decide how to adapt ideas without losing their core. These themes set up the conceptual path that follows: leadership styles guide the stance; leadership practices carry the stance into action; outcomes depend on a fit among style, practice, and context. The next section uses this path to propose clear expected conceptual outcomes.



## Methodology

This concept paper uses a narrative and integrative reading of recent scholarship on leadership styles and practices in schools, with attention to work from 2020 to 2025 and to Malaysian and international sources. The approach applies thematic synthesis across conceptual and empirical studies to surface recurring ideas, gaps, and links between styles, practices, and outcomes. No new data were collected, and no statistical tests were run. To enhance transparency, the review drew on Google Scholar, Scopus, and ERIC using keywords such as “school leadership,” “leadership styles,” and “leadership practices.” Studies were included if they focused on senior school leadership and reported conceptual or empirical insights relevant to the style–practice–outcome chain; papers outside education or published before 2020 were excluded. Approximately 40 studies met these criteria. A simple coding framework was used to classify themes on styles, practices, contextual factors, and outcomes. Conceptual quality was appraised by checking clarity of definitions, methodological coherence, and relevance to the proposed model.

## Expected Conceptual Outcomes (With Model)

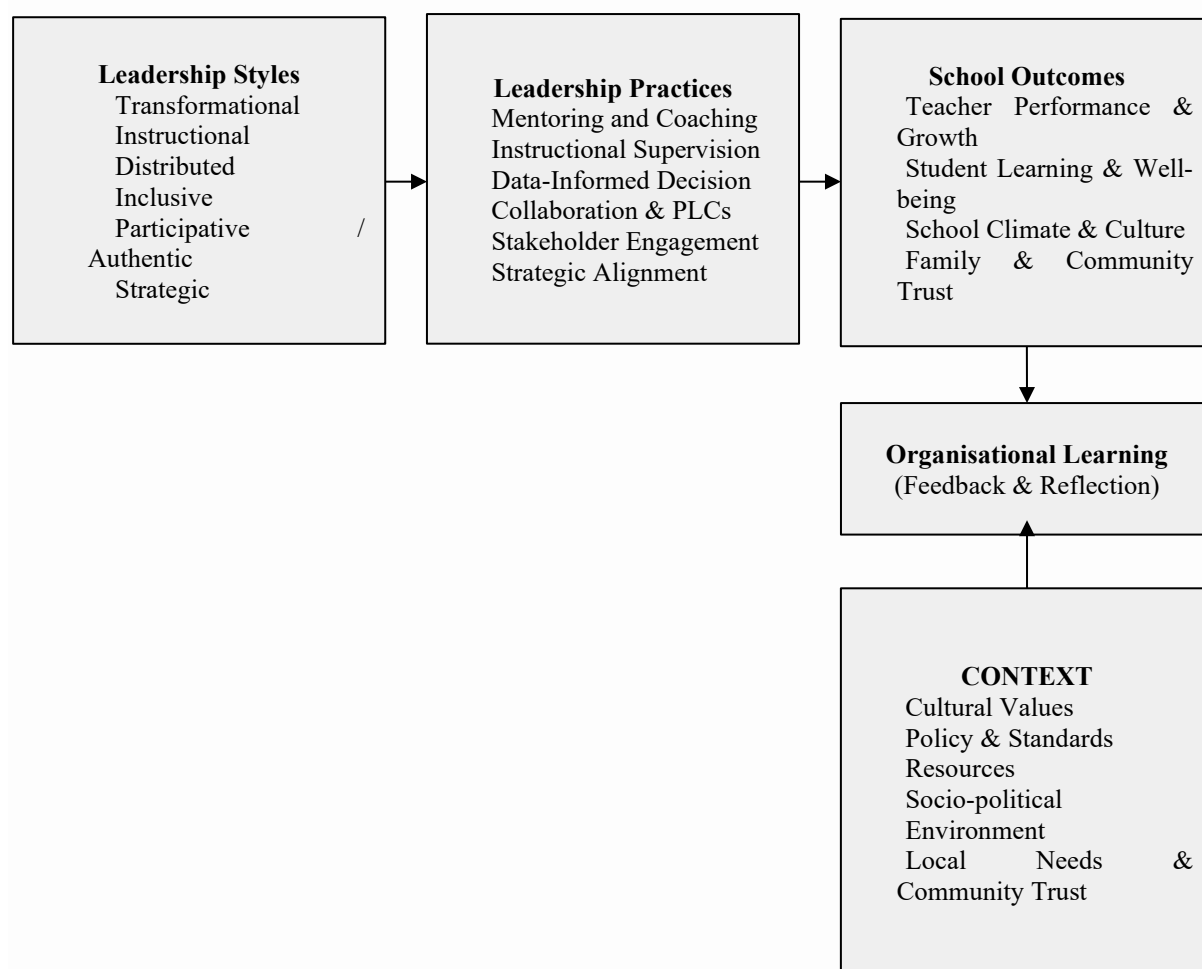
A clear conceptual path can guide both action and study. The first step in this path is simple: leadership styles set the stance. Style is not a label to wear; it is a way of seeing people and problems. A leader with a transformational stance speaks to purpose and invites staff into a shared journey. A leader with an instructional stance guards the quality of teaching and brings focus to the craft. A leader with a distributed stance sees leadership as a team sport and designs roles so that many people can lead. An inclusive stance places fairness and access at the centre and asks hard questions about who is heard and who is helped. A strategic stance keeps the long view in sight and ties daily choices to the wider plan. These stances are not rivals. They are tools. Senior leaders reach for them in different mixes as the work changes across the year and across the school (Harris & Jones, 2023; Abdullah et al., 2022; Adams et al., 2025).

The second step is the bridge from stance to practice. Practices are the acts that staff can see and feel. Mentoring, coaching, and supervision are practices. So are the ways leaders run meetings, plan timetables, handle data, and speak with families. A leader who draws on a transformational stance may hold purpose-rich staff meetings and recognise teacher effort in public ways that build pride. A leader with an instructional stance may design observation cycles with clear criteria and support lesson planning that aligns assessment and pedagogy. A leader with a distributed stance may create teacher leadership teams with real authority over curriculum maps or assessment rubrics. An inclusive leader may redesign referral systems to ensure early support for students with diverse needs and may build routines that bring special education voices into whole-school planning (Azar & Subramaniam, 2023; Barth & Tsemach, 2025; Adams et al., 2025). When style and practice fit, staff can feel the coherence.

The third step is the outcome. Outcomes are not only test scores. They include teacher performance and growth, student engagement and well-being, and the quality of the school climate. They also include the strength of partnerships with families and the wider community. The same style may lead to different outcomes if it moves through different practices. For example, a participative stance that stays abstract may not shift teacher–parent ties, but participative routines that place teachers in shared decision-making and build clear channels for family voice can move those ties in a positive direction (Barth & Tsemach, 2025). An inclusive stance that speaks the language of equity but does not build teacher optimism and collaboration may not change classroom practice; when leaders do both, teachers are more likely to work

together and to adjust instruction for diverse learners (Adams et al., 2025). The point is that practice is the hinge.

The model as shown in Figure 2, proposed here links these three steps in a simple chain: styles → practices → outcomes. It also adds two vital arrows that run back across the chain. The first is context. Culture, policy, resources, and history shape which styles fit, which practices are feasible, and which outcomes are valued. A school in a resource-rich urban area with strong parent networks may lean on distributed teams and participative planning. A school in a high-risk area may place more weight on strategic alignment and clear routines for safety and instruction. The second arrow is learning. Leaders and teams learn from results and adjust their mix of styles and practices over time. When a practice works, it can be scaled; when it fails, the stance or the method can be revised. This cyclical view matches what many studies describe and gives leaders a way to talk about change without blaming people or chasing fads (Tawiah, 2022; Kunalan et al., 2022; Ruloff & Petko, 2025).



**Figure 2: Proposed Conceptual Model**

This model has practical value for senior leaders. It helps explain choices to staff. For example, when a principal chooses to launch peer observation, the model gives a language to link that practice to an instructional stance and to expected outcomes in teacher clarity and student understanding. It also prompts attention to context: if teachers lack time or trust, the same practice will stumble. In that case, a leader may first adopt a distributed stance to build a small

design team, or an inclusive stance to ensure that newer teachers feel safe in the process. The model also helps with sequencing. Leaders can plan short cycles where a transformational stance builds energy and meaning, an instructional stance sets the craft work, and a distributed stance sustains the change through teacher teams. The sequence can be adapted for digital change, inclusive education, or school safety, with concrete practices aligned at each step (Abdullah et al., 2022; Azar & Subramaniam, 2023; Ruloff & Petko, 2025).

For policy and training, the model brings clarity. Standards can name the range of styles and then tie them to observable practices and plausible outcomes. Training can use cases from Ghana, Malaysia, Pakistan, South Africa, Ethiopia, Israel, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Switzerland to show how the same chain takes different shapes across settings (Abdullah et al., 2022; Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021; Parveen et al., 2022; Agyeman & Aphane, 2024; Berhanu, 2025; Barth & Tsemach, 2025; Wardana et al., 2024; Hernandez et al., 2023; Ruloff & Petko, 2025). Trainers can ask leaders to map a local problem, such as low literacy in a year group or poor attendance, and then design a chain: choose the style mix, choose the practices, name the expected outcomes, and check for context risks. This exercise trains leaders to think in linked steps rather than in isolated tasks.

For research, the model suggests testable paths. Studies can measure style and track specific practices to see which combinations move which outcomes under which conditions. Cross-national work can compare whether the same practice mediates the effect of a style in different cultures. Mixed methods can show not only that a link exists but how staff experience the link in daily work. The aim is not to replace rich local descriptions but to add a simple structure that allows clear questions and fair comparison (Harris & Jones, 2023). When a study shows that participative leadership relates to teacher–parent work, for example, future studies can ask which participative practices made the difference and whether the same holds in a different system (Barth & Tsemach, 2025). When inclusive leadership links to collaboration through academic optimism, studies can test how to build optimism in ways that last (Adams et al., 2025).

### Implication

Theoretically, this paper helps connect abstract leadership styles to the practices that do the work. The field often treats style as a label and practice as a list. The model binds them and sets the link inside context and learning. It respects the evidence that no single style wins in all settings and draws on studies that show how mixed styles, used with care, can support change in schools with very different histories and needs (Harris & Jones, 2023; Tawiah, 2022). It also honours the lesson that effects may be indirect and move through teacher beliefs and team routines, as seen in work on inclusive leadership and academic optimism (Adams et al., 2025).

Practically, the model offers a simple tool for professional growth. It helps principals and senior teams plan in a coherent way. It supports the design of professional learning communities, observation cycles, data meetings, and family engagement plans that match a clear stance and a clear goal (Abdullah et al., 2022; Azar & Subramaniam, 2023). It also helps to surface tensions. For example, leaders who invest deeply in strategic planning may have less time for daily instructional coaching; knowing this, teams can distribute roles to protect both needs (Hernandez et al., 2023). In high-risk settings, the model supports a balance of strategic alignment with adaptive, humane practice (Kunalan et al., 2022).

Policy-wise, the model can strengthen standards like SKKSM and KOMPAS 2.0 by tying style to observable practice and to realistic outcomes within Malaysian priorities. It can also guide leadership preparation and appraisal by asking not only “What style?” but “Which practices?” and “What outcomes?” within the current policy goals for inclusion, digital change, and high performance (Abdullah et al., 2022; Ruloff & Petko, 2025). Ministries can use the model to frame guidance that is simple, flexible, and sensitive to local context, and to align resources with the practices most likely to move the needle.

Educationally, the model serves deputy heads, heads of department, and teacher leaders who do much of the leadership work in schools. It explains why a relational and distributed approach can unlock staff energy and why clear instructional routines protect quality. It gives staff a shared language to reflect on their own work and to align efforts within teams. It also supports honest conversations with parents and students by making school plans easier to describe in plain terms (Barth & Tsemach, 2025; Agyeman & Aphane, 2024).

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This concept paper is a synthesis of past studies and does not include new field data. That choice gives breadth but sets limits. Claims here rest on secondary sources that vary in method, measures, and context; causal links are therefore inferred, not demonstrated. As Harris and Jones (2023) note, leadership effects are often indirect and mediated by culture, trust, and professional learning, which makes simple attributions risky. Selection bias is possible because published studies are more likely to report positive or significant results, and English-language sources are more visible. The time window emphasised recent work, which means classic studies were cited selectively and some long-run trends may be underplayed (Vorontsova & Dakhari, 2024). Measures of leadership also differ across studies, MLQ for transformational leadership, PIMRS for instructional leadership, bespoke scales for inclusive or strategic leadership, so comparisons can blur. Context adds another constraint: what counts as “effective” practice in a high-risk Malaysian school (Kunalan et al., 2022) may differ from a resource-rich Swiss gymnasium during digital rollout (Ruloff & Petko, 2025). These limits do not weaken the argument for the style → practice → outcome chain, but they ask for careful testing before policy is set.

Future empirical work should test the model directly by tracking the full chain and by naming mediators and moderators. Inclusive leadership’s link to collaboration through academic optimism is one candidate mechanism to examine with longitudinal data (Adams et al., 2025). Parent partnership offers another test case; participative and authentic leadership predicted teacher attitudes in Israel, but the practice levers that shift those attitudes now need to be specified and trialled in other systems (Barth & Tsemach, 2025). Studies can use mixed methods: multilevel or structural equation models to estimate paths from styles to practices to outcomes, and case studies to see how staff experience those paths in daily routines. Validated tools such as MLQ and PIMRS can be paired with locally adapted instruments for inclusive or strategic leadership, with checks for cultural equivalence. Comparative designs should span Ghana, Pakistan, Malaysia, South Africa, Indonesia, Ethiopia, and small European systems to test whether the same practices mediate style effects across cultures (Esia-Donkoh & Quansah, 2021; Parveen et al., 2022; Agyeman & Aphane, 2024; Wardana et al., 2024; Berhanu, 2025; Ruloff & Petko, 2025). Where randomised trials are not feasible, quasi-experimental designs, interrupted time series, or difference-in-differences around policy shifts can help.

A final direction is design-based and policy-facing. Schools and districts can run improvement cycles that deliberately sequence styles, use transformational moves to set purpose, instructional routines to build craft, and distributed structures to hold gains, and then test which sequence yields better outcomes in teacher performance, student engagement, climate, and community trust. Work on PLCs in Malaysian schools shows how small design choices shape teacher buy-in and practice depth; these can be treated as interventions and studied with before-and-after evidence and teacher voice (Azar & Subramaniam, 2023). High-risk schools can trial strategic-plus-inclusive blends to balance safety, equity, and learning (Kunalan et al., 2022). Digital transformation projects can be used to test whether principals' educational goals and collaborative routines accelerate adoption and improve pedagogy (Ruloff & Petko, 2025). In parallel, ministries can refine standards such as SKKSM and KOMPAS 2.0 by linking style descriptors to observable practices and to outcome rubrics; evaluation then becomes a study of the chain rather than of isolated traits (Abdullah et al., 2022). Taken together, this agenda moves the field from broad claims to tested pathways, builds a cumulative evidence base across the Global South and beyond, and sharpens how leadership development is taught, supported, and assessed.

## Conclusion

Leadership in schools is not a matter of choosing one style and holding it tight. It is the art of matching stance and action to the needs of people and the demands of context. This concept paper set out a simple chain to keep that art grounded: styles guide the mind-set; practices carry the work; outcomes show what changed. Evidence from many systems shows that leaders blend styles and that the same style can work through different practices to move different outcomes. A leader who keeps this linkage in view can act with purpose and adapt with grace (Harris & Jones, 2023; Abdullah et al., 2022). The argument offered here is not that one label solves all problems. It is that clarity about how styles turn into practices, and how both meet context, gives leaders a stronger hand. It also gives systems a better way to train and support those leaders and a better way to learn from results across schools and regions.

This paper is a conceptual foundation, not a report of new field data. It draws together what past studies show and builds a frame for the next steps. Future research can test the model by tracking which practices mediate which styles and which outcomes under which conditions. Mixed methods can capture both the numbers and the stories. Case studies can show how the same chain takes shape in a rural school, an urban cluster, or a high-risk setting. The core message stands: school systems rise when senior leaders develop adaptive, inclusive, and evidence-based practices grounded in a thoughtful blend of styles and tuned to local context (Adams et al., 2025; Agyeman & Aphane, 2024; Tawiah, 2022). When leaders align stance and action, staff feel supported, students feel seen, and schools become places where learning has both heart and structure.

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