

INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AMONG RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN MALAYSIA: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: *Educational environments are becoming increasingly complex, requiring school leaders to encourage innovation and manage change effectively. In Malaysia, rural secondary schools face challenges such as limited resources, geographical isolation, unequal access to technology, and diverse socio-economic conditions. These challenges highlight the need for innovative leadership to improve school performance and prepare schools for future educational needs. However, research on innovative leadership practices among rural secondary school principals in Malaysia remains limited, creating a gap in the existing literature. This study uses a literature review approach to examine these leadership practices among rural secondary school principals in Malaysia. Relevant literature was gathered from books, journal articles, policy documents, and other academic sources retrieved from academic databases and digital libraries. The review explores the concept of innovative leadership, its importance in education, key leadership practices, challenges faced by rural school principals, and gaps in existing research. The findings suggest that innovative leadership practices can improve school effectiveness, support teacher development, strengthen stakeholder involvement, and promote sustainable school improvement. These practices also help create future-ready, ethical, and inclusive learning environments. This review provides useful insights for policymakers, school leaders, and researchers seeking to strengthen leadership practices and educational quality in rural schools in Malaysia.*

Keywords: *innovative leadership, rural secondary schools, school principals, school effectiveness, Malaysia*

Introduction

Education plays an important role in promoting social equity, economic growth, and national development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasizes the need to provide inclusive and quality education for all (UNESCO, 2023). Achieving this goal requires school leaders who can support innovation, adapt to change, and promote continuous school improvement.

School leadership is widely recognised as a key factor in school success. Effective leadership contributes to a positive school climate, improved teacher performance, organisational learning, and better student achievement (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Hallinger & Chen, 2015; Hallinger & Liu, 2025). As educational environments become more complex, principals are expected to move beyond administrative responsibilities and adopt leadership approaches that encourage innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

In Malaysia, school leadership remains a priority in educational reform. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 identifies leadership quality as a key factor in improving school effectiveness and educational transformation (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). More recently, the Malaysia Education Plan 2026–2035 highlights the need for innovative, adaptable, and future-oriented school leaders who can respond to emerging educational challenges (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2026). In this context, innovative leadership has gained increasing attention because it emphasizes creativity, adaptability, problem-solving, and the implementation of new ideas that improve organisational performance. Studies have shown that innovative leadership can strengthen teacher commitment, support school improvement, and enhance organisational resilience (Fuad et al., 2025; Rahim et al., 2023; Famero, 2024).

The importance of innovative leadership is particularly evident in rural secondary schools, where principals often face challenges related to limited resources, geographical isolation, inadequate technological facilities, and diverse socio-economic conditions. These challenges continue to affect educational equity. Although the national Gred Purata Kebangsaan (GPK) for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) improved from 4.60 in 2023 to 4.49 in 2024, the achievement gap between urban and rural secondary schools remained approximately 0.45 GPK points (Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia, 2024). In addition, the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2024) reported that Internet access among rural households was 90.3%, compared with 98.8% in urban areas, while computer usage remained lower in rural communities. The National Digital Education Policy (Dasar Pendidikan Digital) also reported that more than half of Malaysian schools were rated at Stage 3 or below in the 2019 School Excellence Rating, indicating continuing limitations in digital readiness and technology integration (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023). These findings highlight the need for innovative school leaders who can maximise available resources, strengthen teacher capacity, leverage technology effectively, engage local communities, and improve student learning outcomes.

Although educational leadership has been widely studied, most research focuses on instructional, transformational, ethical, and distributed leadership (Vikaraman et al., 2021; Said et al., 2023). Comparatively, innovative leadership among rural secondary school principals in Malaysia has received limited attention. Therefore, this literature review examines the concept of innovative leadership, identifies its key dimensions and practices, explores its relevance to rural secondary schools, and highlights directions for future research in the Malaysian context.

Literature Review

Concept and Definition of Innovative Leadership

Educational leadership has evolved from traditional management approaches toward more collaborative, adaptive, and innovation-oriented practices. While earlier leadership models focused mainly on administration, control, and compliance, today's educational environments require school leaders who can encourage innovation, respond to change, and promote continuous school improvement (Machynska, 2025). As schools face rapid technological, social, and educational changes, principals are increasingly expected to lead innovation and support school transformation.

The concept of innovative leadership has received increasing attention in educational research as schools seek better ways to respond to change and improve performance. Although there is no universally accepted definition of innovative leadership, scholars generally agree that it is a leadership approach that promotes innovation and organisational improvement. Gliddon (2006) emphasised the creation of an environment that encourages creativity and the implementation of new ideas, while Deschamps (2009) described innovative leaders as individuals who initiate, support, and guide innovation within organisations. Similarly, Schork (2018) highlighted innovative leaders as change agents who inspire others to embrace innovation and continuous improvement. Although these scholars define innovative leadership differently, they all emphasise the importance of innovation, change, and continuous improvement in achieving organisational success.

In educational settings, innovative leadership refers to a principal's ability to introduce and implement new ideas, strategies, and practices that improve teaching, learning, and school effectiveness. This leadership approach requires creativity, adaptability, problem-solving, collaboration, and the effective use of technology to meet changing educational needs (Said et al., 2023). In addition to carrying out administrative responsibilities, innovative leaders create a school culture that encourages innovation, continuous learning, and shared responsibility for school improvement.

The concept of innovative leadership is also supported by Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory (Rogers, 1995; 2003), which explains how new ideas, practices, and technologies are adopted within organisations. The theory highlights the importance of communication, social systems, and individual perceptions in influencing the adoption of innovation. In schools, principals play an important role as change agents by encouraging teachers and other stakeholders to adopt and implement innovative practices. This theory suggests that successful innovation depends not only on new ideas but also on effective leadership that supports and guides organisational change.

Recent studies recognise innovative leadership as an important factor in school improvement. Rahim et al. (2023) and Famero (2024) found that innovative leadership strengthens teacher commitment, organisational resilience, and school performance. In Malaysia, Fuad et al. (2025) further contributed to this field by developing and validating the Principal's Innovation Leadership Scale. Together, these studies suggest that innovative leadership not only encourages innovation but also strengthens leadership capacity and supports continuous school improvement.

Overall, the literature shows that innovative leadership is characterised by creativity, adaptability, collaboration, and continuous improvement. These characteristics are especially important in rural secondary schools, where principals face challenges such as limited resources, geographical isolation, technological constraints, and diverse community needs. Therefore, innovative leadership can help principals improve school effectiveness and support better educational outcomes in rural schools.

Importance of Innovative Leadership in Education

Innovative leadership is increasingly recognized as an important factor in improving educational quality and supporting school improvement. As schools face rapid technological, social, and educational changes, principals need to promote innovation, manage change effectively, and create learning environments that support continuous improvement. As a result, innovative leadership helps schools respond to new challenges, improve student outcomes, and enhance overall school effectiveness (Fuad et al., 2025; Said et al., 2023).

The literature consistently shows that innovative leadership supports educational development through collaboration, community engagement, and the effective use of technology. Although transformational and distributed leadership are different leadership approaches, they share common characteristics with innovative leadership, including creativity, shared decision-making, and collaboration (Vorontsova & Dahari, 2024). Together, these studies suggest that innovation is more effective when school leaders encourage collaboration, empower teachers, and promote shared responsibility.

The literature also highlights the importance of ethical and inclusive leadership in supporting innovation. Studies in Malaysia have found that ethical and inclusive leadership strengthens stakeholder confidence, improves relationships, and fosters a positive school climate (Vikaraman et al., 2021; Adams et al., 2025). These findings suggest that innovation is more sustainable when ethical values and inclusive leadership practices guide it.

The importance of innovative leadership became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Famero (2024) found that adaptive and innovative leadership enabled school principals to respond effectively to unexpected challenges while maintaining school operations. These findings suggest that innovative leadership is valuable not only during normal circumstances but also when schools face uncertainty and rapid change.

Overall, the literature indicates that innovative leadership strengthens collaboration, teacher development, school effectiveness, and continuous improvement. These qualities are especially important in rural secondary schools, where principals often face challenges related to limited resources, geographical isolation, technological constraints, and diverse community needs. Therefore, innovative leadership can help principals respond to these challenges while improving school effectiveness and educational outcomes in rural schools.

Innovative Leadership Practices Identified in Literature

The literature identifies five key practices that support innovative leadership in schools: (i) collaborative leadership, (ii) technology integration, (iii) community engagement and stakeholder involvement, (iv) professional development and capacity building, and (v) strategic problem-solving and adaptability. Although these practices are discussed separately in the literature, they are closely related and work together to improve school effectiveness, particularly in rural secondary schools.

(i) Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership is widely recognised as an important practice of innovative leadership because it promotes teamwork, shared decision-making, and active participation among school leaders, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. Famero (2024) emphasised stakeholder collaboration as an important strategy for managing change, whereas Amin et al. (2024) highlighted teacher empowerment through distributed leadership. Collectively, these studies indicate that collaborative leadership strengthens innovation by encouraging shared responsibility, collective problem-solving, and stakeholder commitment to school improvement.

In rural secondary schools, collaborative leadership is particularly valuable because principals often rely on strong partnerships to address limited resources and diverse community needs. Working closely with teachers, parents, and the local community enables principals to strengthen school–community relationships, maximise available resources, and support sustainable school improvement (Vorontsova & Dahari, 2024). As a result, stronger collaboration helps principals respond more effectively to local challenges and promote sustainable school development.

(ii) Technology Integration

Technology integration has become an important practice of innovative leadership because it enhances communication, decision-making, resource management, and teaching and learning. Fuad et al. (2025) identified technology as a key dimension of innovative leadership through the development and validation of the Principal’s Innovation Leadership Scale, whereas Khofi et al. (2026) highlighted the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to improve leadership decision-making and personalised learning. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that technology enables school leaders to support innovation through informed decision-making, more effective school management, and improved educational practices.

In rural secondary schools, technology integration is particularly important because digital tools can help overcome challenges associated with geographical isolation and limited resources. By using technology effectively, principals can strengthen communication, expand access to educational resources, encourage collaboration, and improve teaching and learning. Consequently, technology integration provides an effective means of enhancing school effectiveness and supporting better educational outcomes in rural schools.

(iii) Community Engagement and Stakeholder Involvement

Community engagement and stakeholder involvement are important practices of innovative leadership because they encourage active participation among teachers, parents, and local communities in supporting school development. Noor and Nawab (2022) emphasised the role of stakeholder participation in improving school effectiveness through shared decision-making, whereas Rahim et al. (2023) highlighted its contribution to sustainable leadership, teacher commitment, and a positive school climate. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of community engagement in strengthening trust, collaboration, and long-term school improvement.

In rural secondary schools, community engagement is particularly valuable because schools often depend on local support to address resource limitations and diverse community needs. By building strong partnerships with parents and community members, principals can encourage shared responsibility, mobilise local resources, and create a stronger commitment to school

improvement. These partnerships help schools respond more effectively to local challenges and support sustainable educational development (Said et al., 2023).

(iv) Professional Development and Capacity Building

Professional development and capacity building are important practices of innovative leadership because they strengthen teachers' knowledge, skills, and ability to respond to educational change. Widiyan and Takayoshi (2024) emphasised the value of structured professional development programmes in enhancing teachers' competencies, whereas Vorontsova and Dahari (2024) highlighted leadership practices that encourage teachers to improve their performance and embrace innovation. Overall, the literature indicates that continuous professional learning is essential for building teacher capacity and sustaining school improvement.

In rural secondary schools, professional development is especially important because teachers often have limited access to training and learning opportunities. By investing in capacity-building initiatives, principals can strengthen teacher effectiveness, encourage innovation, and improve classroom practices. Continuous professional learning also helps schools adapt to changing educational demands and supports long-term school improvement (Khasawneh et al., 2026).

(v) Strategic Problem-Solving and Adaptability

Strategic problem-solving and adaptability are essential practices of innovative leadership because they enable principals to respond effectively to changing educational needs and unexpected challenges. Said et al. (2023) described innovative leaders as change agents who encourage new ideas, manage uncertainty, and support continuous improvement, whereas Famero (2024) demonstrated how adaptive leadership helped principals maintain school operations and support stakeholders during periods of change. Collectively, the literature shows that strategic problem-solving and adaptability strengthen organisational resilience and contribute to continuous school improvement.

Rural secondary school principals often face challenges such as limited resources, geographical isolation, staffing constraints, and unequal access to technology. These conditions require principals to think creatively, make informed decisions, and use available resources effectively. By remaining adaptable and applying innovative problem-solving strategies, principals can respond more effectively to local challenges, strengthen organisational resilience, and support sustainable school development.

Innovative Leadership in Rural Secondary School Contexts

In Malaysia, rural secondary schools are government or government-aided schools located outside urban areas, including interior and remote regions. The Ministry of Education Malaysia (2024) classifies schools by location and accessibility using the Modul Pengurusan Sekolah (MPS). Compared with urban schools, rural secondary schools often face challenges such as limited resources, inadequate technological infrastructure, geographical isolation, and diverse community needs. These contextual challenges influence leadership practices and affect educational outcomes in rural secondary schools.

Recent studies show that innovative leadership enables principals to respond more effectively to these contextual challenges. Rahim et al. (2023; 2024) found that innovative leadership strengthens teacher commitment, improves school climate, and supports continuous school

improvement. These findings indicate that principals who adopt creative and adaptive leadership approaches are better able to maximise available resources and respond to the changing needs of rural schools.

However, implementing innovative leadership in rural schools is not without challenges. Resource limitations, policy requirements, cultural factors, and increasing leadership demands may limit principals' ability to introduce and sustain innovation (Said et al., 2023; Hassim & Shokory, 2025). In addition, Adams et al. (2025) highlighted that principals are expected to balance innovation with ethical and inclusive leadership while responding to the diverse expectations of teachers, students, parents, and local communities.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that innovative leadership provides a practical approach for addressing the unique challenges of rural secondary schools. Through collaborative leadership, technology integration, community engagement, professional development, and strategic problem-solving, principals can strengthen school effectiveness, build stronger stakeholder relationships, and support sustainable educational development. These practices reinforce the importance of innovative leadership in improving educational outcomes in rural secondary schools in Malaysia.

Research Gap and Future Directions

Despite the growing body of research on educational leadership, innovative leadership among rural secondary school principals in Malaysia has received limited attention. Most existing studies focus on ethical, sustainable, instructional, and distributed leadership, with comparatively less emphasis on innovative leadership as a distinct leadership approach in rural school settings (Said et al., 2023; Rahim et al., 2023). Although previous research has highlighted the importance of innovation, collaboration, and adaptability, there is still limited empirical evidence on how rural school principals apply innovative leadership to address challenges such as resource limitations, geographical isolation, and diverse community needs. Research on how ethical, creative, and adaptive leadership dimensions can be integrated into innovative leadership in the Malaysian rural context remains limited (Vikaraman et al., 2021).

Another important gap is the lack of context-specific frameworks and validated instruments for assessing innovative leadership in rural schools. Although Fuad et al. (2025) developed the Principal's Innovation Leadership Scale and Khasawneh et al. (2026) proposed a leadership agility framework, further research is needed to examine their applicability in rural secondary school settings.

Future studies should examine innovative leadership practices among rural secondary school principals using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. Comparative research between rural and urban schools, together with studies on emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, could provide deeper insights into innovative leadership in education (Vorontsova & Dahari, 2024; Khofi et al., 2026). Such research could contribute to the development of context-specific leadership frameworks, leadership development programmes, and policy initiatives that support sustainable school improvement in rural Malaysia.

Methodology

This study employed a literature review approach to examine innovative leadership practices among rural secondary school principals in Malaysia. Relevant literature was identified through Scopus, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The search was conducted

between January and March 2026 and focused on publications published from 2020 to 2026. Keywords such as *innovative leadership*, *school leadership*, *educational leadership*, *school principal*, *rural secondary schools*, and *Malaysia* were used during the search process. Boolean operators (AND and OR) and phrase searching were applied to refine the search results.

The retrieved publications were screened by title, abstract, and full-text review using inclusion and exclusion criteria. The most relevant studies were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: studies on innovative leadership, school leadership, or rural education within the education sector; involving school leaders; and relevant to the Malaysian context. Duplicate records, conference papers without full texts, non-academic publications, and studies outside the education sector or unrelated to the research objectives were excluded. Following the screening process, 25 relevant publications were selected and synthesised using a thematic approach. The findings were organised into five themes: (i) concept and definition of innovative leadership, (ii) importance of innovative leadership in education, (iii) innovative leadership practices, (iv) innovative leadership in rural secondary school contexts, and (v) research gap and future directions.

Discussion and Implications

Discussion

The literature highlights the growing importance of innovative leadership in addressing the challenges faced by rural secondary schools in Malaysia. Innovative leadership extends beyond traditional administrative responsibilities by emphasising creativity, adaptability, collaboration, and continuous improvement. The review identified five key innovative leadership practices—collaborative leadership, technology integration, community engagement, professional development, and strategic problem-solving—which contribute to school effectiveness and educational improvement.

These findings are consistent with Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory (Rogers, 1995; 2003), which explains how new ideas and practices are adopted within organisations. The identified leadership practices strengthen communication, collaboration, and stakeholder participation, enabling principals to act as change agents who facilitate the adoption of innovation within schools. This suggests that successful innovation depends not only on introducing new ideas but also on creating a supportive school environment that encourages continuous learning and organisational improvement.

The review also shows that rural secondary school principals operate in complex environments characterised by limited resources, geographical isolation, diverse community needs, and policy constraints. These contextual challenges require principals to adapt innovative leadership practices to local conditions while making effective use of available resources. Although the literature demonstrates that innovative leadership can strengthen teacher commitment, foster a positive school climate, enhance organisational resilience, and support sustainable school development, empirical evidence from rural secondary schools in Malaysia remains limited. This highlights the need for further research to examine how innovative leadership is implemented and sustained in rural school contexts.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings suggest that rural secondary school principals should adopt leadership practices that promote collaboration, innovation, and stakeholder engagement. Collaborative and

community-oriented approaches can strengthen relationships among teachers, students, parents, and local communities, thereby supporting school improvement and student learning outcomes (Noor & Nawab, 2022; Said et al., 2023).

The integration of technology and innovative teaching practices can also enhance school management, communication, and student engagement, even in resource-constrained environments (Vorontsova & Dahari, 2024; Fuad et al., 2025). In addition, ethical and sustainable leadership practices can strengthen trust, increase teacher commitment, and create a positive school climate that supports long-term development (Vikaraman et al., 2021; Rahim et al., 2023; Rahim et al., 2024).

The review also highlights the importance of professional development programmes that strengthen principals' creative, adaptive, and innovative leadership capabilities. Such programmes can help school leaders respond effectively to the challenges of rural school contexts and support continuous improvement (Khasawneh et al., 2026).

The findings have important implications for educational policymakers and leadership development agencies in Malaysia. The Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), State Education Departments (JPN), and District Education Offices (PPD) should strengthen initiatives that promote innovative leadership among rural secondary school principals. This includes providing leadership development programmes that focus on innovation, adaptability, collaboration, and technology integration. Greater support for digital infrastructure, professional learning opportunities, and school-community partnerships can further help rural school leaders address local challenges and improve educational outcomes.

Conclusion

This literature review examined the concept, importance, and practices of innovative leadership among rural secondary school principals in Malaysia. The findings indicate that innovative leadership, through practices such as collaborative leadership, technology integration, community engagement, professional development, and strategic problem-solving, contributes to school effectiveness, teacher commitment, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable school improvement. The review also highlights the challenges faced by rural secondary schools, including resource constraints, geographical isolation, technological limitations, and diverse community needs, which reinforce the need for innovative and adaptive leadership. Despite growing interest in educational leadership, research on innovative leadership in Malaysian rural secondary schools remains limited. Therefore, strengthening principals' capacity to lead innovation is essential for improving educational outcomes and supporting sustainable educational development in rural Malaysia.

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