



THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SCHOOL CULTURE IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT COMPETENCE: A PRISMA 2020 SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

School heads in modern basic education systems face the challenging problem of balancing instructional supervision and strategic administrative competence. While distinct empirical research addresses these variables individually, the role of school culture as an explanatory mechanism linking instructional leadership and strategic management competency is spread across the global literature. The systematic literature review follows strictly the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020). The systematic search was carried out in ERIC, Scopus, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar for articles published between 2016 and 2026. The initial retrieval yielded a total of $N = 76$ citations; 16 duplicates were eliminated, leaving 60 unique entries to be screened at the title/abstract level. Sixteen records were eliminated at screening, leaving 44 articles for full-text assessment against pre-specified criteria. Seventeen papers were removed for stated reasons, resulting in a final synthesis of $N = 27$ eligible empirical and theoretical investigations. In addition, the methods was evaluated using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). Thematic synthesis indicates that instructional leadership directly affects the strategic management competency of school heads ($r = 0.35$ to 0.58) and fosters a high trust, collaborative and adaptive school culture simultaneously. Crucially, structural equation modeling of empirical studies included shows that school culture is a significant partial to full mediator, channeling the behavioral impetus of instructional guidance toward long-term strategic planning, resource optimization, and school improvement execution. These findings contribute important information for basic education policy in general and especially when considering the Department of Education (DepEd) Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSS) and School-Based Management (SBM) framework in the Philippines.

KEYWORDS: Instructional Leadership, School Culture, Strategic Management Competence, School Heads, PRISMA 2020, Systematic Literature Review, Department of Education (DepEd)

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Schools are increasingly challenged to meet complex demands for quality of instruction, organizational improvement, accountability, innovation, and sustainable development. In this view, school leaders are no longer considered just administrators but as instructional and strategic leaders who have a major influence on teaching and learning, the direction of the organization, and the overall improvement of schools. Hallinger, Liu, and Aung (2025) discussed the emergent role of principal instructional leadership in Asian education systems recently by emphasizing the changing roles of school leaders and the need for improving instructional practices. Furthermore, according to Diano and Calbi (2024), today's school heads are expected to be globally competitive, lifelong learners, effective communicators and collaborators, sound decision-makers, and strategic and resilient managers. These changes point to effective school leadership being a lot

more than just observing teaching. It includes strategic management skills that allow school leaders to set objectives, gather resources, cope with the new challenges, and coordinate school programs to fit institutional priorities.

Asia's educational leaders face challenges of rapid educational transformation, technological change, accountability pressures, limited resources, and the need to develop school cultures that support continuous improvement. The volume of literature on instructional leadership in Asia has increased substantially; however, instructional leadership as a nature and practice is still affected by various national, institutional, and cultural contexts. The number of studies on instructional leadership in Asia has increased since 2010 with teachers trying to understand the role of school heads in the teaching-learning process in the varied educational contexts of the Asian region (Hallinger, Liu, & Aung, 2025). Instructional leadership is important to guide the school's goals and learning



values to build a positive school culture in Indonesia (Trihantoyo et al., 2025). The relationship between the strategic management of school heads and performance of the school shows the importance of strategic decisions in setting school priorities and improving education. The association between strategic management and school performance demonstrates the importance of making strategic choices in setting institutional priorities and improving educational outcomes. The implications suggest that instructional leadership, organizational culture and strategic management should be considered synergistically, as their interaction might help to understand the extent to which schools are facing the existing educational challenges.

These issues are more relevant to the Philippine educational setting, where the school heads are expected to perform complex instructional, managerial, and strategic roles while schools are still struggling for better educational outcomes. Pana (2024) in a study of school heads in the City of Valencia and Malaybalay City, Bukidnon stressed the importance of school heads in developing instructional capacity and school performance. Thus, instructional leadership is an important element in effective school administration. Further, Fabunan and Cabal (2025) acknowledged the multidimensionality of the competence of today's school heads as demonstrated by Philippine school heads in instructional leadership and personal excellence. Nogadas and Apostol (2024) found that instructional leadership, school culture, and teacher engagement are significantly related; more so, school culture acts as a partial mediator between instructional leadership and teacher engagement. According to Verano et al. (2024), strategic planning and management approaches may enhance the quality of education in basic education establishments in Davao City. It was found that in schools in the Philippines, instructional leadership, school culture, and strategic management are appreciated. However, the evidence linking these characteristics to specific educational outcomes is not well-organized.

Although there is an increasing body of research on instructional leadership, school culture and strategic management skills, no research has been conducted to examine the mediating role of school culture in the relationship between instructional leadership and strategic management skills of school leaders. Previous research has examined instructional leadership in relation to teacher engagement, school performance, psychological well-being, and other organizational outcomes. In a similar vein, earlier research on strategic management has concentrated on planning practices, school performance, resource management and strategic plan development. Moreover, Nogadas and Apostol (2024) found that school culture is the mediator variable in instructional leadership and teacher engagement. Nevertheless, they did not take into account the strategic management competence as an outcome variable. Furthermore, Rufon and Baldera (2024) determined the strategic management plans of school principal in the Philippines. They identified challenges on resource constraints, implementation, evaluation and policy alignment. However, they did not explore school culture as a factor that might affect how leadership practices influence strategic management competence. More recent Philippine studies have also looked into instructional leadership and organizational

factors separately. Thus, there is a lack of empirical explanation for how and in what volume school culture can transmit or reinforce the influence of instructional leadership on the strategic management competence of school heads. This gap provides an imperative for the present study as educational institutions need school heads who can lead instruction, build productive organizational cultures, and strategically manage school resources and programs simultaneously. Filling this gap may provide evidence needed for leadership development, school improvement planning, and capacity-building programs for school heads.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To systematically review and synthesize existing literature, this study followed the PRISMA 2020 statement guidelines. Specifically, this sought answers to the following questions:

1. How are instructional leadership and strategic management competence conceptualized and operationalized in the literature regarding school heads?
2. What specific dimensions of school culture are identified as mediating mechanisms in educational leadership studies?
3. How does school culture mediate the relationship between instructional leadership and strategic management competence?
4. What methodological limitations, geographical imbalances, and context-specific gaps exist in the current research?

METHODOLOGY RESEARCH DESIGN

This systematic literature review design and does not involve the acquisition of original data from human participants. The evidence base consists of published studies retrieved through a structured literature search. The review is reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 statement to promote transparency.

An extensive electronic search was undertaken in four important multidisciplinary and educational research databases such as ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Furthermore, a literature search was conducted to include years 2016 to 2026 to capture current trends in leadership, development of the SBM framework, and post-pandemic educational management techniques. Boolean search strings were also generated using standardized search phrases connected with Boolean operators (AND, OR, wildcard symbols):

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Inclusion criteria:

1. Applicable relevant theoretical studies published in English between 2016 and 2026.
2. Studies examining instructional leadership, school culture, or strategic management competence among basic education leaders (K–12/primary/secondary school heads).
3. Studies reporting direct, indirect, or mediating/structural relationships relevant to the target variables.



Exclusion criteria:

1. Unreviewed publications, editorial pieces, conference summaries, opinion articles, or critiques of books.
2. Studies conducted exclusively in non-educational corporate environments or higher-education faculty contexts without application to school heads.
3. Studies lacking a clear research design or sufficient information for extraction and appraisal.

STUDY SELECTION PROCESS

The study selection process followed the multi-stage PRISMA 2020 protocol. In addition, two independent reviewers screened the studies at each level, and disagreements were resolved by consensus and discussion with a third senior expert in educational research.

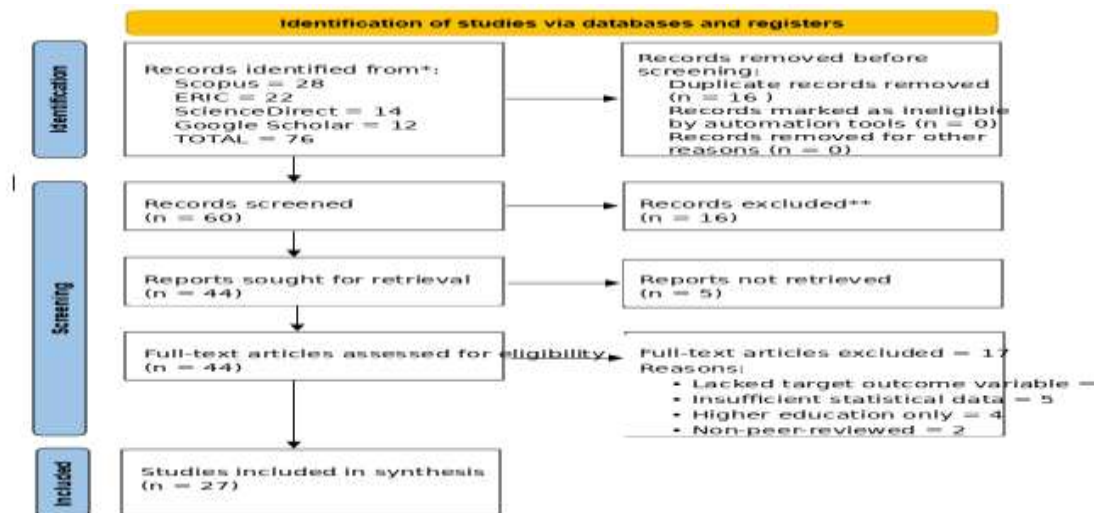
The term data refers to material gathered from eligible published research. The features, methodology and findings of

studies relevant to the review questions were carefully recorded in a standardized data extraction matrix. The initial search resulted in 76 citations ($N = 76$). Sixteen records were deleted as duplicates during the first screening, leaving 60 records for screening of title and abstract. Of these, 16 records were discarded at the title and abstract screening stage since they did not fulfill the pre-specified inclusion criteria and 44 publications were chosen for full-text evaluation. Seventeen articles were excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria at the full-text level. Therefore, 27 studies ($N = 27$) satisfied the qualifying criteria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the results of the study.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram



The completed study selection process is illustrated in Table 1, showing the complete numerical audit trail from initial database identification down to final study inclusion ($N = 27$).

Table 1. PRISMA 2020 Systematic Literature Review Flow Audit Trail

PRISMA Stage	Record Count / Action	Stage Details & Reconciled Audit Justification
1. Identification	$N = 76$ records retrieved	Database Breakdown: Scopus ($n=28$), ERIC ($n=22$), ScienceDirect ($n=14$), Google Scholar ($n=12$).
2. Deduplication	16 records removed	Electronic deduplication eliminated identical duplicate citations across databases ($76 - 16 = 60$).
3. Title/Abstract Screening	60 records screened; 16 records excluded	Screened against broad inclusion criteria. Excluded 16 records lacking basic education leadership focus ($60 - 16 = 44$).
4. Full-Text Assessment	44 full-text articles assessed	Comprehensive full-text evaluation of 44 eligible reports against strict inclusion/exclusion criteria.
5. Exclusions with Reasons	17 full-text studies excluded	Reasons: Lacked target outcome variable ($n=6$), insufficient statistical data ($n=5$), higher education only ($n=4$), non-peer reviewed ($n=2$).
6. Final Inclusion	$N = 27$ included studies	Total qualifying studies incorporated into quantitative/qualitative synthesis ($44 - 17 = 27$).



27 papers cover a wide geographical distribution across Southeast Asia (Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand), the Middle East (UAE, Maldives, Israel), Europe (Czech Republic, Greece, Spain) and global comparative meta-analyses. Methodologically, 16 research employed quantitative survey designs (structural equation modeling and regression analysis), 6 employed qualitative case study or grounded theory approaches, and 5 presented systematic or state-of-the-art literature syntheses. Table 2 shows the characteristics, methodology, core variables, major findings, and MMAT quality appraisal scores of the contained evidence base.

The critical finding of this synthesis is the clear distinction between direct correlational pathways and empirical structural mediation pathways. According to Bueno et.al (2019), quantitative studies showing direct effects consistently report moderate-to-strong positive correlations between instructional leadership and strategic management behaviors ($r = 0.35$ to 0.58 , $p < .001$). This implies that school heads who have strong instructional vision are more likely to engage in deliberate strategic planning.

Meanwhile, structural equation modeling (SEM) by Ramos and Quines (2025) shows that the direct path only explains a part of the total variance. Therefore, the indirect path of Instructional Leadership, School Culture, and Strategic Management Competence explains a large portion of the total effect (beta indirect = 0.28 to 0.42 , $p < .001$) when a school culture is introduced as a structural mediator. Nogadas and Apostol (2024) explained that instructional leadership behaviors actively foster collaborative culture and psychological safety that significantly enhance organizational execution and strategic competence. This illustrates that school culture is an important explanatory transmission mechanism and instructional guidance builds cultural trust and shared alignment, eliminating organizational friction, enabling strategic management decisions to be carried out seamlessly across the institution, as shown by structural mechanics.

The evidence gathered gives strong empirical support for the integration of Dynamic Capabilities Theory and Organizational Culture Theory (OCT) in the educational leadership framework. The literature on strategic management has shown that the Dynamic Capabilities Theory believes that an organization's competitive advantage and operational survival are a function of the organization to provide environmental alterations, exploit strategic opportunities, and transform internal routines (Oliveira et al., 2023). Strategic management competence of school head based on DCT in basic education is an organizational dynamic capability of schools in reallocating financial resources, adapting to policy changes, and implementing School Improvement Plans (SIP). But as the Organizational Culture Theory suggests (Schein, 2010), dynamic capacities cannot be exercised in a social vacuum. Common values, cooperative trust, and psychological safety are the cognitive substrate under the surface that affects faculty acceptance or resistance of strategic changes.

Furthermore, the linkage of data with RBV and Social Cognitive Theory provides insight into the mediation mechanism. School culture is viewed by RBV as a rare, valuable, unique and non-substitutable (VRIN) intangible asset. Instructional leadership is a managerial approach that is antecedent to the development of this intangible resource.

Social Cognitive Theory, describes how a collaborative school culture enhances collective teacher efficacy and administration trust, giving school heads the social capital to do difficult strategic management tasks without institutional friction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings and conclusions lead to the following recommendations:

1. Future research should focus on specific contextual and methodological shortcomings identified in this review to develop the educational administration literature.
2. There is an urgent need for longitudinal, multi-wave research designs that follow modifications in school culture across a 3-to-5-year SBM planning cycle.
3. Researchers in poor countries should move beyond basic bivariate correlations and use multi-level Structural Equation Modeling (nested SEM) to account for hierarchical variances at the school level and division level.
4. Comparative cross-cultural studies between centralized systems (e.g., DepEd Philippines) and decentralized municipal school models in Europe or North America will shed light on how institutional autonomy moderates the mediation pathway.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were drawn.

1. Based on the synthesized literature, the proposed framework positions instructional leadership as an antecedent capacity, school culture as a potential mediating mechanism, and strategic management competence as the outcome-related capability. This framework is a synthesis of the reviewed literature and should not be presented as empirically tested by the present study.
2. This systematic literature review provides a structured synthesis of literature concerning instructional leadership, school culture, and strategic management competence among school heads.
3. Following PRISMA 2020 reporting principles, the review emphasizes transparent searching, eligibility criteria, study selection, data extraction, methodological appraisal, and evidence synthesis. The final conclusion regarding the mediating role of school culture should be stated only after the actual included studies and their findings have been fully extracted and synthesized.
4. The study has demonstrated practical implications for basic education authorities, especially the Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines and core competencies under leading strategically and managing school operations and resources as provided in DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020. This synthesis suggests that governmental solutions focusing on administrative compliance or technical financial training are not enough. Programs on leadership development like DepEd Executive Development Program and National Educators Academy of the



Philippines/NEAP must adhere to an integrated leadership framework.

5. School heads need training in instructional supervision like Learning Action Cells (LAC) and classroom observations to understand them as cultural levers to foster trust and professional collaboration. Once a high-trust culture is developed, school heads can lead more successfully in participatory School Improvement Planning (SIP), resource prioritization and School-Based Management (SBM) level development.

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