



Instructional Leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa: A PRISMA 2020 Systematic Review of Empirical Evidence and Research Gaps (2000-2026)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Existing reviews have addressed instructional leadership in selected Sub-Saharan African contexts, but a region-wide synthesis of indexed empirical evidence remains limited.

Objectives: To synthesise peer-reviewed empirical research on instructional leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa (January 2000–February 2026), describe geographic and methodological characteristics, and identify research gaps.

Eligibility criteria: Original empirical studies examining instructional leadership as a primary variable in educational institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa, published in English in journals indexed in Scopus, ERIC, or DOAJ.

Information sources: Scopus (n = 180), ERIC (n = 288), DOAJ (n = 6), and supplementary Google Scholar searches (n = 126). Searches were completed on 28 February 2026.

Results: Of 600 records identified, 26 met the eligibility criteria. Twenty-two studies (84.6%) met four or more of five MMAT appraisal criteria. Criterion-level MMAT appraisal identified methodological strengths alongside limitations across the included studies. GRADE assessments indicated moderate certainty for teacher-effectiveness outcomes and very low certainty for student-performance outcomes. GRADE-CERQual assessments indicated moderate confidence in evidence relating to contextual barriers to instructional leadership implementation.

Conclusions: Evidence remains geographically and methodologically uneven, with gaps in Francophone and Lusophone contexts, TVET, longitudinal research, and middle leadership. Five research priorities are proposed.

Keywords: Instructional leadership, Educational leadership, Sub-Saharan Africa, Systematic review, PRISMA 2020, GRADE, GRADE-CERQual, TVET



INTRODUCTION

The quality of education in Sub-Saharan Africa occupies a central place in the global development agenda. Despite notable gains in school enrolment under the Education for All framework, the region continues to face persistent challenges in learning outcomes, teacher effectiveness, and institutional governance (UNESCO, 2023). In this context, instructional leadership has been progressively recognised as a pivotal lever for educational improvement. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) defined instructional leadership as the behaviours through which educational leaders prioritise, coordinate, and evaluate teaching and learning. Meta-analytic evidence confirms a significant indirect effect on student achievement through teaching quality, with an effect size of 0.42, substantially larger than that reported for transformational leadership (Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe, 2008; Hallinger and Heck, 2010).

However, the extent to which this evidence base reflects the realities of Sub-Saharan African educational institutions remains underexplored. African schools operate within conditions that differ markedly from those in which instructional leadership frameworks were originally developed: resource constraints, diverse linguistic environments, large class sizes, and governance structures that blend administrative, community liaison, and leadership functions (Lewin, 2009; Tikly and Barrett, 2011). The policy imperative for systematic inquiry is reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025, both of which identify leadership and management capacity as foundational to educational transformation. Hallinger's (2018) landmark systematic review of educational leadership and management research in Africa, spanning 506 articles, documented a geographically skewed literature dominated by South Africa and called for focused topic-specific reviews. This review responds directly to that call.

This review also accounts explicitly for 30 non-indexed Google Scholar records that, while ineligible for synthesis, evidence a publication-infrastructure gap rendering important regional scholarship invisible to international evidence bases.

Beyond synthesising empirical trends, this review examines the extent to which dominant instructional leadership theories align with the realities of Sub-Saharan African educational institutions and identifies areas where contextual considerations may refine these frameworks, contributing to scholarly debate on the applicability and adaptation of these models across diverse educational settings.

This review addresses four research questions:

1. What is the geographic distribution and temporal trajectory of empirical instructional leadership research in Sub-Saharan Africa?
2. What institutional contexts, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks characterise this literature?
3. What outcome variables have been studied, and how is research distributed across education sectors?
4. What are the principal research gaps, and what agenda is needed to advance instructional leadership scholarship in the region?



CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Evolution of Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership emerged as a distinct construct during the early 1980s, largely in response to school effectiveness research that identified active principal oversight of the instructional programme as a characteristic of effective schools (Edmonds, 1979; Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee, 1982). Hallinger and Murphy (1985) operationalised the construct through a three-dimensional model: (a) defining and communicating the school mission; (b) managing the instructional programme through curriculum coordination, supervision, and monitoring of student progress; and (c) promoting a positive learning climate. The Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) derived from this model became the dominant global instrument, and recent evidence confirms its continued global reach (Hallinger, Liu, Aung, & Yan, 2025). Robinson et al.'s (2008) meta-analysis of 27 studies confirmed an effect size of 0.42 for instructional leadership on student outcomes, substantially exceeding transformational leadership at 0.11. Distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006) later reframed instructional leadership as a collective phenomenon, while transformational leadership (Leithwood, Tomlinson, and Genge, 1996) provided a complementary, vision-oriented alternative.

Instructional Leadership in Sub-Saharan African Contexts

The applicability of Western instructional leadership frameworks to Sub-Saharan African contexts requires careful scrutiny. Bush, Fadare, Chirimambowa, and colleagues (2022) found in a policy review spanning six Sub-Saharan African countries that three countries had no explicit instructional leadership policies, and that evidence of actual practice was limited even where frameworks existed. Abonyi and Sofo (2021) documented how Ghanaian basic school leaders enacted instructional leadership through centrally mandated, managerially oriented practices underpinned by behaviourism, with limited collegial or instructionally focused engagement. These findings question whether Western frameworks translate straightforwardly to Sub-Saharan African contexts, a concern the discussion examines systematically.

African Educational Leadership Scholarship and Ubuntu

Bush (2013) argues that definitional complexity in instructional leadership requires careful contextualisation before policy application in Africa. Ngcobo and Tikly (2010) demonstrate that effective leadership in South African township and rural schools operated through relational, community-embedded processes that conventional principal-centric instruments were ill-equipped to capture. Ubuntu philosophy, the relational ethic that personhood is constituted through community, has been proposed as a foundation for African educational leadership theory (Msila, 2008). While Ubuntu offers important relational insights, African educational contexts remain heterogeneous, and indigenous leadership frameworks are therefore best interpreted contextually rather than essentialised. As the findings section of this review shows, Ubuntu was not identified as a systematic analytical framework within the studies included in this review, representing both a theoretical gap and a research opportunity; this absence within the reviewed sample should not be read as absence from African scholarship more broadly.



Instructional Leadership Beyond Schools: The TVET Context

Globally, fewer than five percent of instructional leadership studies have examined post-secondary contexts (Hallinger, 2005). In Sub-Saharan Africa, Badenhorst and Radile (2018) proposed distributed instructional leadership as a response to poor institutional performance in South African TVET colleges; however, as a conceptual paper without primary empirical data, it was excluded from this review's synthesis under inclusion criterion (a). Muthumuni and Mokoena (2024) provided the only indexed empirical TVET study captured during the search period. Outside the indexed literature, Ojera, Simatwa, and Ndolo (2021) investigated instructional leadership in Kenyan TVET institutes, and Kaisara (2024) examined it in Botswana's public TVET brigades; both were excluded under inclusion criterion (d) as non-indexed. These exclusions are significant in themselves and are discussed further in Sections Outcome Variables and Sector Distribution (RQ3) and The TVET Deficit as a Policy-Research Misalignment. Collectively, instructional, distributed, and transformational leadership, together with Ubuntu, function in this review as conceptual lenses through which the included studies are interpreted and assessed, rather than as variables tested by the review itself.

METHOD

Review Design and Protocol

This study employed a systematic review design guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021). The review protocol was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework prior to commencement of the database searches (OSF: <https://osf.io/qr7ej>). No deviations from the pre-registered protocol occurred during the conduct of this review. Narrative synthesis was adopted as the analytical strategy given the methodological heterogeneity across included studies (Popay et al., 2006). No meta-analysis was conducted; this decision was pre-specified in the protocol given the anticipated variation in study designs, outcome measures, and analytical approaches.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were considered eligible if they:

- reported original empirical research with primary data collected through systematic fieldwork, including qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches;
- focused substantively on instructional leadership practices, behaviours, or perceptions as a primary variable;
- were conducted in educational institutions in Sub-Saharan African countries as defined by the United Nations geoscheme for Africa, comprising Eastern, Middle, Southern, and Western Africa;
- were published in peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus, ERIC, or DOAJ. Google Scholar was used in a supplementary capacity to identify indexed articles not retrieved through primary searches, consistent with recommended practice (Haddaway, Collins, Coughlin, and Kirk, 2015), but did not serve as an independent eligibility-conferring database;
- were published between January 2000 and February 2026, inclusive; and
- were available in English.



Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- were theoretical, conceptual, or position papers without primary empirical data;
- were book chapters, dissertations, theses, conference proceedings, or reports;
- were published in non-indexed journals or grey literature, including repository deposits, working papers, and pre-prints, irrespective of substantive quality;
- were conducted outside Sub-Saharan Africa;
- focused exclusively on other leadership constructs without examining instructional leadership as a primary variable; or
- examined instructional supervision as an administrative function without reference to instructional leadership as a construct. Application of criterion (c) is responsible for the exclusion of 30 studies identified via Google Scholar that address instructional leadership in Sub-Saharan African contexts but are published in non-indexed journals. These exclusions are explicitly discussed in Sections 4.3 and 5.4.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

Systematic searches were completed on 28 February 2026 across three primary electronic databases: Scopus, ERIC, and DOAJ. Scopus was selected for its broad multidisciplinary peer-reviewed coverage and superior indexing of African-based journals relative to other major citation databases (Visser, Van Eck, and Waltman, 2021). ERIC provides specialised indexing of educational research literature. DOAJ covers open-access journals not always captured in Scopus or ERIC. Google Scholar was employed in supplementary capacity only, following Haddaway et al. (2015). Citation reference lists of all included studies were manually screened to identify any additional eligible publications not captured through the database searches. Web of Science was not searched separately, given the substantial Scopus-WoS overlap documented by Visser et al. (2021); Scopus was adopted as the primary multidisciplinary database on the basis of its superior coverage of African-based journals (Visser et al., 2021). African Journals Online (AJOL) was considered during protocol development. However, a scoping assessment indicated substantial overlap between educational leadership journals indexed in AJOL and those already captured through Scopus and DOAJ. To maintain a manageable and reproducible search process while minimising duplicate retrievals, AJOL was not included as a primary database. Nevertheless, the authors acknowledge that some relevant African scholarship may not have been captured through this approach. Full database-specific search strings are presented in Table 1.



Table 1: Database Search Strings Applied in the Systematic Review (Final searches completed 28 February 2026)

Database	Search String
Scopus	<i>TITLE-ABS-KEY("instructional leadership" OR "principal instructional leadership" OR "instructional management" OR "head teacher leadership") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("Sub-Saharan Africa" OR "South Africa" OR "Kenya" OR "Ghana" OR "Nigeria" OR "Uganda" OR "Tanzania" OR "Ethiopia" OR "Zimbabwe" OR "Botswana" OR "Zambia" OR "Malawi" OR "Mozambique" OR "Cameroon" OR "Angola" OR "Rwanda" OR "Lesotho" OR "Eswatini" OR "Namibia" OR "Sierra Leone" OR "Sudan") AND LIMIT-TO(DOCTYPE,"ar") AND LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE,"English") AND PUBYEAR > 1999</i>
ERIC	<i>("instructional leadership" OR "principal instructional leadership" OR "instructional management") AND ("Sub-Saharan Africa" OR "South Africa" OR Kenya OR Ghana OR Nigeria OR Uganda OR Tanzania OR Ethiopia OR Zimbabwe OR Botswana OR Zambia OR Malawi OR Mozambique OR Cameroon OR Angola OR Rwanda OR Lesotho OR Eswatini OR Namibia)</i>
DOAJ	<i>"instructional leadership" AND ("Sub-Saharan Africa" OR "South Africa" OR Kenya OR Ghana OR Nigeria OR Uganda OR Tanzania OR Ethiopia OR Zimbabwe OR Botswana OR Zambia OR Malawi OR Mozambique OR Cameroon OR Angola OR Rwanda OR Lesotho OR Eswatini OR Namibia)</i>
Google Scholar (supplementary)	<i>allintitle: "instructional leadership" AND ("Sub-Saharan Africa" OR "South Africa" OR Kenya OR Ghana OR Nigeria OR Uganda OR Tanzania OR Ethiopia OR Zimbabwe OR Botswana) - custom date range 2000-2026</i>

While the search strategy incorporated the dominant terminology used in instructional leadership scholarship, studies employing alternative descriptors such as leadership for learning, pedagogical leadership, curriculum leadership, learning-centred leadership, or academic leadership may not have been retrieved. This limitation reflects the need to balance retrieval sensitivity with search precision and is acknowledged as a potential source of omission.

Study Selection Process

All retrieved records were exported to Endnote. The first author removed duplicates using automated detection followed by manual verification. The deduplicated library was then shared with the second and third authors. Stage 1 (title and abstract screening) was conducted by the



first author; uncertain cases were flagged and discussed with the second author until consensus was reached. Of the 364 deduplicated records, 47 were flagged as uncertain at title and abstract stage and sent for dual review; consensus was achieved for all 47 cases without any unresolved disagreements. Stage 2 (full-text screening) was conducted by the first author, with doubtful cases resolved through discussion with the second author. The final included set was agreed upon by all three authors. No automation tools were used at any stage of the selection process. Formal inter-rater reliability statistics (e.g., Cohen's Kappa) were not calculated for the full screening set, as the consensus-resolution approach did not produce independent parallel ratings for all records; this is acknowledged as a methodological limitation.

Data Collection Process

Data were extracted using a standardised form capturing 14 fields: (1) author(s) and year; (2) journal title and indexing database; (3) country and sub-region; (4) educational sector; (5) study design; (6) sampling strategy; (7) sample size and participant composition; (8) data collection instruments; (9) theoretical framework; (10) primary outcome variable(s); (11) key findings; (12) stated limitations; (13) MMAT quality rating; and (14) reviewer notes. These 14 fields were pre-specified in the OSF protocol. For reporting purposes in Section 3.6, fields are grouped into 10 primary conceptual categories; fields (2), (13), and (14) are methodological audit fields, and field (11) is sub-divided in the synthesis.

Extraction was conducted by the first author. The second author independently verified a random 40% sample of extractions ($n = 10$ studies). Across this sample, seven minor discrepancies were identified, primarily relating to outcome variable categorisation and study design classification. All discrepancies were resolved through discussion and documented in the OSF audit trail. The low frequency and non-substantive nature of discrepancies indicate a high level of consistency in application of the extraction framework.

No authors of included studies were contacted for data confirmation or clarification; where data were ambiguous, the original published text was recorded verbatim. Full dual independent extraction was not performed for all 26 studies, and this is acknowledged as a methodological limitation. The complete per-study characteristics table is provided as supplementary Table S2. Theoretical framework entries in the extraction table record what each study explicitly states: 18 studies name a specific framework in their text, and eight studies are recorded as having no explicit theoretical framework. No frameworks were inferred beyond what studies state directly.

The 14 data items were selected to address the four research questions (Introduction) and to enable the narrative synthesis, risk of bias, and certainty assessments described in Sections Effect Measures, Reporting Bias Assessment, and Study Selection Flow.

Risk of Bias Assessment in Individual Studies

All 26 included studies were appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018), applying design-specific criteria for qualitative (5 criteria), quantitative descriptive and correlational (5 criteria), and mixed-methods designs (5 criteria). Seobi and



Wood (2016), which employed a collaborative action-learning design, was appraised using the MMAT qualitative criteria, given its primary reliance on qualitative data collection and interpretive analysis; this design-mapping decision is documented in the OSF audit trail. Studies were appraised independently by two reviewers; discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Inter-rater agreement across all 26 MMAT appraisals was calculated using Cohen's Kappa (Landis and Koch, 1977): $\kappa = 0.81$, indicating almost perfect agreement and confirming the reliability of the quality appraisal process. Twenty-two studies (84.6%) were rated high to moderate-high quality (4 of 5 criteria or above); four studies (15.4%) were rated moderate quality (3 of 5 criteria). No studies were excluded on the basis of methodological quality; all 26 studies satisfied at least three of the five MMAT criteria. Per-study MMAT scores are provided in supplementary Table S1.

Effect Measures

As this review employs narrative synthesis rather than meta-analysis, no pooled effect measures were calculated. Where quantitative studies reported correlation coefficients or mean comparisons, these are reported descriptively in the findings sections. The absence of a formal meta-analysis was pre-specified in the review protocol, given the anticipated heterogeneity of study designs, populations, and outcome measures.

Synthesis Methods

Narrative synthesis followed Popay et al.'s (2006) four-stage framework: (a) preliminary tabular synthesis; (b) relationship exploration through iterative thematic coding; (c) robustness assessment using MMAT quality ratings; and (d) drawing conclusions and identifying implications. Disagreements in thematic coding were resolved through discussion and documented in the OSF audit trail. No subgroup analyses or sensitivity analyses were conducted; this was pre-specified in the OSF protocol given the small corpus ($N = 26$) and the methodological heterogeneity across study designs, which precluded meaningful subgroup comparisons. MMAT quality ratings were integrated into the robustness assessment stage to serve as a structured form of evidence-quality weighting within the narrative synthesis.

Reporting Bias Assessment

Formal statistical assessment of reporting bias, such as funnel plot asymmetry testing, was not applicable given the absence of meta-analysis and the heterogeneous nature of included designs. However, the potential for reporting bias was considered in two respects. First, the restriction of the review to indexed journal publications, while necessary for quality assurance, may systematically exclude studies with null or negative findings that are more likely to appear in grey literature or non-indexed venues. The 30 unique Google Scholar records excluded under the indexing criterion represent the most direct evidence available of this potential bias; their substantive content could not be incorporated into the synthesis but their existence is noted as a boundary condition on the review's conclusions. Second, within included studies, the predominance of self-report instruments in quantitative designs introduces social desirability response bias as a consistent threat to internal validity across the corpus.



Certainty of Evidence Assessment

Given the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies, two complementary certainty frameworks were applied. The GRADE framework (Schunemann et al., 2019) was applied to quantitative outcomes, specifically teacher effectiveness and student academic performance, evaluating risk of bias, inconsistency, indirectness, imprecision, and publication bias. These two outcomes were selected because they were the only quantitatively measured outcomes for which sufficient effect data existed across studies to permit formal certainty assessment. GRADE-CERQual (Lewin et al., 2018) was applied to the four principal qualitative synthesis themes, evaluating methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy of data, and relevance. The results are presented in Tables 4 and 5 under the Certainty of Evidence section.

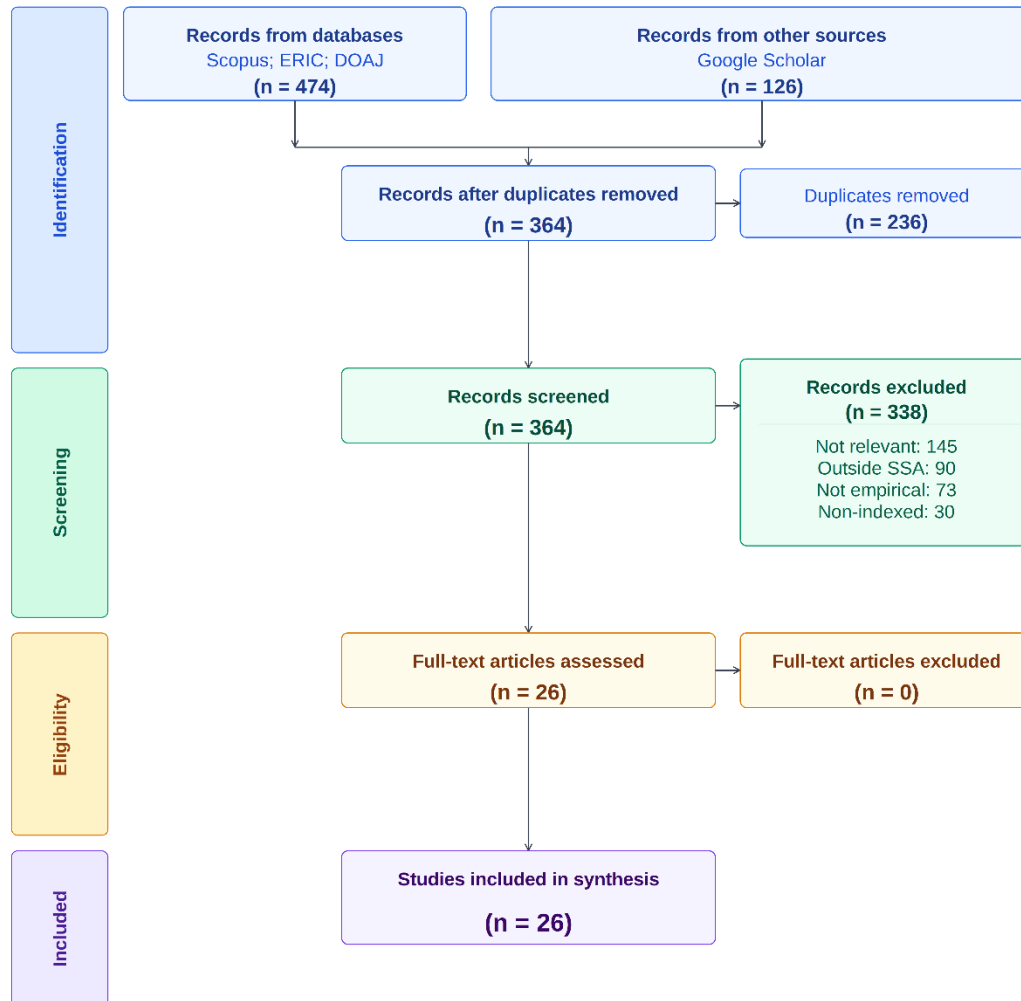
Study Selection Flow

Searches across the three primary electronic databases identified 474 records (Scopus, $n = 180$; ERIC, $n = 288$; DOAJ, $n = 6$). An additional 126 records were identified through supplementary Google Scholar searching, yielding 600 records in total prior to deduplication. After removal of 236 duplicate records (140 cross-database duplicates and 96 duplicates originating from Google Scholar), 364 unique records remained for title and abstract screening.

During title and abstract screening, 338 records were excluded for the following reasons: (i) instructional leadership was not a primary or clearly measurable construct within the study ($n = 145$); (ii) the study was conducted outside Sub-Saharan Africa ($n = 90$); (iii) the study did not report original empirical research based on primary data ($n = 73$); and (iv) the study was not published in journals indexed in Scopus, ERIC, or DOAJ ($n = 30$), as per the predefined database inclusion criteria.

A total of 26 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. No studies were excluded at the full-text stage, as all retrieved studies met the predefined inclusion criteria. Potentially eligible records had been verified against the inclusion criteria during title and abstract screening prior to full-text retrieval, which accounts for the absence of exclusions at the full-text stage rather than reduced screening stringency. The final review therefore included 26 studies in the qualitative synthesis. Figure 1 presents the complete PRISMA 2020 study selection flow diagram, prepared in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Study Selection Flow Diagram — Instructional Leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa (2000–2026)





RESULTS

Table 2 provides an overview of the geographic and design characteristics of all 26 included studies. A complete per-study characteristics table is available as supplementary Table S2.

Table 2: Geographic and Design Characteristics of Included Studies (N = 26)

Country	N	%	Designs	Primary Outcome Variables
South Africa	10	38.5	QLT (9), MXD (1)	Curriculum delivery; IL barriers; HOD IL; school improvement; COVID-19 disruption; TVET IL
Zimbabwe	3	11.5	QLT (3)	Deputy principal IL; cluster autonomy; IL in inclusive schooling
Ethiopia	3	11.5	MXD (1), QNT (1), QLT (1)	Student performance; qualification effects on IL; IL and transformational leadership
Ghana	3	11.5	MXD (1), QNT (1), QLT (1)	Headteacher IL practices; gender equity in IL; headteacher role in teaching and learning
Botswana	2	7.7	QLT (1), QNT (1)	Academic performance and headship IL proficiencies; post-PSMDP IL deficiencies
Nigeria	2	7.7	QNT (2)	Teacher effectiveness (PIMRS-based; both IL dimensions)
Tanzania	1	3.8	MXD (1)	IL capacity development following British Council professional development intervention
Eswatini	1	3.8	MXD (1)	Principal IL practices and teacher professional development
Lesotho	1	3.8	QNT (1)	Science HOD self-reported IL practices across PIMRS dimensions
TOTAL	26	100	QLT=15; MXD=5; QNT=6	9 countries Southern Africa 65%, Western Africa 19%, Eastern Africa 15%

Geographic Distribution and Temporal Trajectory (RQ1)

The 26 included studies span nine Sub-Saharan African countries: South Africa (n = 10; 38.5%), Zimbabwe (n = 3; 11.5%), Ethiopia (n = 3; 11.5%), Ghana (n = 3; 11.5%), Botswana (n = 2; 7.7%), Nigeria (n = 2; 7.7%), Tanzania (n = 1; 3.8%), Eswatini (n = 1; 3.8%), and Lesotho (n = 1; 3.8%). Southern Africa accounts for 17 of the 26 studies (65.4%), Western Africa for five (19.2%), and Eastern Africa for four (15.4%). This distribution closely replicates Hallinger's (2018) finding of South African dominance in the broader African educational leadership and management literature. The complete absence of Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, which encompasses Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and others comprising over one third of the region's population, reflects the absence of eligible studies from those contexts under the review's inclusion criteria. Lusophone and conflict-affected states are similarly absent.



Temporally, the indexed evidence base is concentrated in the post-2020 period. Only four studies (15.4%) predate 2020: two in 2000 to 2009 (Pansiri, 2008; Oduro, 2008) and two in 2010 to 2019 (Bhengu and Mkhize, 2013; Seobi and Wood, 2016). The remaining 22 studies (84.6%) were published between 2020 and 2026, with 15 appearing in 2023 to 2026. This post-2020 concentration reflects the review's indexed, English-language evidence base and may be influenced by database coverage as much as by research activity.

Institutional Contexts, Methodological Approaches, and Theoretical Frameworks (RQ2)

Study Designs

Qualitative designs predominate ($n = 15$; 57.7%), encompassing generic qualitative designs, multiple and single case studies, and participatory action research. Semi-structured interviews are the primary data collection method across qualitative studies. Mixed-methods designs account for five studies (19.2%) and quantitative designs for six (23.1%). The PIMRS was the most frequently used standardised instrument, employed across both quantitative and mixed-methods studies (Adeosun, 2022; Bada, Ariffin, and Nordin, 2020; Lisene, Jita, and Mapulanga, 2026; Pansiri, 2008). Sample sizes in qualitative studies range from $N = 3$ (Chitamba and Jita, 2023; Ralebese, Jita, and Badmus, 2025) to $N = 56$ (Bakokonyane, 2022); quantitative samples range from $N = 67$ (Lisene et al., 2026) to $N = 815$ (Pansiri, 2008). Qualitative studies used purposive samples ranging from $N = 3$ to $N = 56$, which are not intended to provide statistical generalisation but may support analytic transferability. The larger quantitative samples were nevertheless drawn from cross-sectional, predominantly self-report studies, limiting causal inference.

Theoretical Frameworks

Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) Instructional Leadership Model is the most frequently cited theoretical framework, explicitly named in 10 of the 26 studies (38.5%). Eight further studies are recorded in the data extraction as having no explicit theoretical framework, while the remaining eight cite alternative frameworks including distributed leadership theory (Chitamba and Jita, 2023; Makaye et al., 2021), Hargreaves' Capital Theory (Bakokonyane, 2022), Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Gechere et al., 2025), enactive sense-making theory (Muresherwa and Jita, 2021), distributed and situational leadership (Oduro, 2008), Bass's transformational leadership (Haile, 2020), and a conceptual instructional leadership framework (Musandu et al., 2023). Hallinger's dominance as the most cited framework nonetheless reflects a significant concentration, particularly given that studies using the PIMRS instrument operationally adopt the three-domain model regardless of how they label their theoretical orientation. Muresherwa and Jita's (2021) enactive sense-making framework represents the most theoretically original contribution in the corpus. Gechere et al.'s (2025) integration of Bandura's self-efficacy theory is one of the few studies to theorise teacher agency as a mediating variable. Ubuntu philosophy was not systematically employed as an analytical framework in any included study, despite its repeated invocation in the wider African educational leadership literature.

Institutional Contexts and Sub-level Focus

Studies are distributed across secondary ($n = 15$; 57.7%), primary ($n = 9$; 34.6%), dual-phase ($n = 1$; 3.8%), and TVET ($n = 1$; 3.8%) education. The principal was the primary leadership actor



examined in 17 studies; these role categories are not mutually exclusive where studies considered multiple leadership levels. An emerging sub-principal strand examines heads of department in five studies (Kubheka, Naidoo, and Oloba, 2025; Lisene et al., 2026; Musandu, Jita, and Bada, 2023; Seobi and Wood, 2016; partially Muthumuni and Mokoena, 2024) and deputy principals in two (Chitamba and Jita, 2023; implicitly in Chabalala and Naidoo, 2021), indicating an emerging focus on distributed leadership roles in the literature.

Outcome Variables and Sector Distribution (RQ3)

Table 3 presents the distribution of outcome variables across the 26 included studies.

Table 3 Primary Study Focus and Outcome Areas Across Included Studies (N = 26)

Primary Focus / Outcome Area	Included Studies (n = 26)
Teacher effectiveness and job performance	*Adeosun (2022); *Bada, Ariffin, and Nordin (2020)
Curriculum delivery and reform implementation	*Chabalala and Naidoo (2021); *Mestry and Govindasamy (2021); *Ralebese, Jita, and Badmus (2025); *Makaye, Jita, and Mapetere (2021)
Student or academic performance	*Bakokonyane (2022); *Gechere, Oumer, and Ouke (2025)
Instructional leadership practices, descriptive and experiential accounts	*Abonyi and Sofo (2021); *Bhengu and Mkhize (2013); *Bush and Anania (2023); *Muresherwa and Jita (2021); *Muthumuni and Mokoena (2024); *Oduro (2008); *Haile (2020) ; *Demozie and Dessie (2023); *Pansiri (2008); *Musandu, Jita, and Bada (2023);
HOD and deputy principal Instructional leadership practices	*Chitamba and Jita (2023); *Kubheka, Naidoo, and Oloba (2025); *Lisene, Jita, and Mapulanga (2026); *Seobi and Wood (2016)
Barriers and conditions for Instructional leadership implementation	*Ismail and Sepeng (2024); *Mbatha and Makhubu (2021)
Gender equity in instructional leadership	*Abonyi, Boateng, Adjei-Boateng, and Ansaah (2024)
Instructional leadership during COVID-19 disruption	*Mahlatji, Seshoka, and Mabasa (2023)

Note. Studies were assigned to one primary focus category based on the main outcome, phenomenon, leadership role, or contextual issue investigated. Categories are mutually exclusive for the purposes of this table, although individual studies may have examined more than one related construct.



Descriptive and experiential accounts of instructional leadership practices constitute the most frequently represented outcome category ($n = 10$), spanning diverse national contexts and role levels. Among quantitatively measured outcomes, teacher effectiveness is the most directly studied, with both Nigerian PIMRS-based studies (Adeosun, 2022; Bada et al., 2020) reporting significant positive associations between all three instructional leadership dimensions and teacher effectiveness. Gechere, Oumer, and Ouke (2025) found that principal instructional leadership ($R = 0.68$) and teacher self-efficacy ($R = 0.818$) are both significantly correlated with student performance in Ethiopian secondary schools, with teacher self-efficacy showing the stronger correlation (These values are taken from the study's detailed correlation tables; its published abstract reports $R = 0.78$ and $R = 0.88$, respectively.). Pansiri (2008) provides a cautionary counter-narrative: following the Primary School Management Development Project (PSMDP) intervention in Botswana, school management teams demonstrated instructional leadership deficiencies including poor interpersonal supervision skills and limited curriculum management creativity. Together, these studies suggest that the relationship between instructional leadership and student outcomes is contingent and context-dependent rather than uniformly positive.

In the TVET sector, Muthumuni and Mokoena (2024) documented structural fragmentation, policy incoherence, and administrative overload as primary barriers to effective instructional leadership; this remains the only indexed TVET-specific empirical study across the 26-year review period.

Research Gaps and Five-Priority Agenda (RQ4)

Priority 1: Geographic Diversification Beyond the South African Anglophone Core

With 38.5% of the corpus from South Africa and 65.4% from Southern Africa, the indexed English-language evidence base is geographically concentrated. The 30 non-indexed Google Scholar records suggest that instructional leadership research is being conducted across a broader range of national contexts, but these studies remain invisible to systematic evidence synthesis. Bilingual systematic reviews and targeted research capacity investment through the African Union, UNESCO, and CREATE are required, as is support for researchers in Francophone, Lusophone, and conflict-affected countries to publish in indexed outlets.

Priority 2: TVET Instructional Leadership as an Independent Research Programme

One indexed empirical study across 26 years represents a deficit of extraordinary magnitude given TVET's centrality to continental development frameworks (African Development Bank, 2020; International Labour Organization, 2022). Non-indexed studies, including Kaisara (2024) and Ojera et al. (2021), confirm that research activity exists but remains invisible to international evidence synthesis. TVET-contextualised instructional leadership frameworks and investment in indexed dissemination are urgently required.

Priority 3: Longitudinal, Experimental, and Explanatory Designs

The overwhelmingly cross-sectional and descriptive corpus cannot establish causal relationships between instructional leadership and educational outcomes. Longitudinal cohort studies, quasi-



experimental evaluations of leadership development interventions, and structural equation modelling studies testing mediation and moderation pathways are needed to move beyond descriptive mapping toward causal explanation.

Priority 4: Contextualised Theoretical Frameworks Beyond the PIMRS Monoculture

The dominance of Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) model as the most cited framework (explicitly named in 10 of 26 studies; operationally adopted by all PIMRS-using studies regardless of stated framework) creates theoretical concentration that may misrepresent how leadership operates in communally embedded, resource-constrained African institutions. Frameworks drawing from Ubuntu philosophy, distributed leadership theory, enactive sense-making (Muresherwa and Jita, 2021), and critical postcolonial scholarship require systematic development and peer validation as contextually appropriate alternatives.

Priority 5: Sub-Principal and Distributed Instructional Leadership

The emerging HOD and deputy principal strand requires sustained research investment. Findings across HOD-focused studies converge on a shared diagnosis: HODs understand the instructional leadership role in principle but enact it inadequately due to role ambiguity, administrative overload, limited formal authority, and the absence of targeted professional development. These findings have systemic rather than role-specific implications and point toward the need for structural reforms alongside individual capacity-building.

Certainty of Evidence

Tables 4 and 5 present GRADE and GRADE-CERQual certainty assessments respectively.

Table 4: GRADE Summary of Findings -- Quantitative Outcomes (N = 2 Outcome Domains from 3 Studies)

Outcome (Studies)	Number of Studies	Number of Participants	RoB	Inconsistency	Indirectness	Imprecision	Publication Bias	GRADE Certainty
Teacher effectiveness (*Adeosun, 2022; *Bada et al., 2020)	2	778	Moderate	Not serious	Not serious	Serious	Not assessable	MODERATE
Student academic performance (*Gechere et al., 2025)	1	369	Moderate	N/A	Not serious	Serious	Not assessable	VERY LOW

Note. GRADE certainty is reported on the four-level scale (High = 4, Moderate = 3, Low = 2, Very low = 1). 'Not assessable' indicates that formal publication-bias assessment was not possible given the small number of studies per outcome.



Table 5: GRADE-CERQual Summary of Four Qualitative Synthesis Themes

Qualitative Synthesis Theme	Studies (n)	Methodological Limitations	Coherence	Adequacy of Data	Relevance	CERQual Confidence
Principal constrained by contextual barriers: resource scarcity, role ambiguity, and administrative overload	IL 10	Minor concerns	High	Adequate	Direct	MODERATE
Collaborative culture and middle management as mediators of IL effectiveness	2	Minor concerns	High	Adequate	Direct	MODERATE
Sub-principal HOD and deputy IL: gap between understanding and enactment, and capacity deficits	4	Minor concerns	Moderate	Moderate	Direct	LOW-MODERATE
TVET structural fragmentation and policy incoherence as primary barriers	IL: 1	Moderate concerns	N/A	Limited	Direct	LOW

The GRADE and CERQual assessments indicate moderate certainty that principal instructional leadership is positively associated with teacher effectiveness in Sub-Saharan African secondary schools, although this rests on only two studies from one country and requires replication.



Certainty for student-performance outcomes is very low, based on a single mixed-methods study. There is moderate confidence in the qualitative finding that principal instructional leadership is constrained by contextual barriers, with the contextual-barriers theme drawing on 10 studies and showing high thematic coherence. Confidence in TVET-specific instructional leadership findings is low, given only one contributing indexed study. The evidence base is moderately coherent but evidentially fragile and cannot yet support confident causal claims or broad policy prescriptions.

DISCUSSION

The South Africa Effect and Its Structural Causes

South Africa's 38.5% share is consistent with structural advantages in research capacity and funding documented in the wider literature (Visser et al., 2021; Hallinger, 2018). The 30 non-indexed studies suggest that publication infrastructure may contribute to the observed concentration. Strengthening research capacity and publication pathways could broaden representation.

South Africa's disproportionate representation (38.5%) is consistent with well-documented structural advantages in research infrastructure, including university research capacity, postgraduate supervision density, and National Research Foundation funding (Visser et al., 2021; Hallinger, 2018), that are substantially less available in most other Sub-Saharan African countries. The 30 non-indexed studies identified through Google Scholar suggest that this dominance may reflect publication infrastructure inequality rather than an absence of research activity across the region. The findings suggest that future initiatives aimed at strengthening research capacity and publication infrastructure may help broaden representation within the instructional leadership evidence base.

Methodological Convergence and Its Epistemological Consequences

The qualitative literature is contextually rich but limited in generalisability. Resource scarcity, role ambiguity, administrative overload, and inadequate professional development recur across several countries, suggesting that these may be structural constraints. However, limited quantitative evidence means their prevalence and policy responsiveness remain uncertain. The two Nigerian PIMRS-based studies and Pansiri's (2008) Botswana survey provide quantitative exceptions. Their positive associations should be interpreted cautiously because cross-sectional self-report designs do not establish causality and may introduce common-method bias.

The Hallinger Framework: Hegemony or Heuristic?

The dominance of the Hallinger model and PIMRS raises the question of whether it reflects theoretical consensus or practical instrument availability. PIMRS offers a validated measure but may privilege principal-centred and directive conceptions of leadership. Eight studies had no explicit framework and eight used alternatives, showing that conceptual space beyond Hallinger already exists. Muresherwa and Jita (2021) illustrates the potential of contextually grounded theorising.

Ubuntu was not used as a primary analytical framework in any included study. Future research should test whether relational and community-oriented perspectives explain dimensions of instructional leadership that principal-centred models may overlook.



The TVET Deficit as a Policy-Research Misalignment

Only one indexed TVET study was identified across 26 years. TVET managers work within governance arrangements involving government, industry, and qualification bodies, creating a more layered leadership context than conventional school models capture without contextualisation.

Emerging Sub-Principal Leadership as a Theoretical Frontier

HOD and deputy principal studies point to systemic barriers, including role ambiguity, limited authority, administrative burden, and inadequate professional development. Leadership development therefore needs to be accompanied by structural measures such as clearer roles, delegated authority, reduced administrative burden, and stronger middle-leadership structures.

LIMITATIONS

The review is limited by its English-language restriction, which excludes potentially relevant French-, Portuguese-, Arabic-, and Swahili-language research and may contribute to the absence of evidence from Francophone and Lusophone contexts. The indexing criterion also excludes relevant studies in non-indexed journals; the 30 Google Scholar records indicate the scale of this boundary. AJOL and Web of Science were not searched as primary databases and may have yielded additional studies. Extraction was independently verified for 40% of studies, but full dual extraction was not undertaken. MMAT appraisal involved reviewer judgement, although two reviewers independently appraised all studies and agreement was high ($\kappa = 0.81$). The search ended in February 2026. Self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias. Screening was led by the first author, with uncertain records reviewed by the second author, so full screening-stage agreement could not be estimated. Finally, citation chaining was limited to the 26 included studies, which may have contributed to under-representation of older research.

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Citation chaining was limited to the 26 included studies, which may have contributed to under-representation of older research.



CONCLUSION

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first systematic review focused specifically on empirical instructional leadership research in Sub-Saharan Africa, distinct from broader regional leadership reviews. The 26 included studies from nine countries show a geographically concentrated and predominantly qualitative evidence base. South Africa accounts for 38.5% and Southern Africa for 65.4% of the corpus. Hallinger and Murphy's model remains the most explicitly cited framework, while TVET is represented by only one indexed empirical study. MMAT appraisal found criterion-level methodological strengths and limitations, and GRADE/CERQual assessments indicate that the evidence is insufficient for causal claims or broad policy prescriptions.

Contextual barriers, including resource scarcity, role ambiguity, administrative overload, inadequate professional development, and policy-practice gaps, recur across several national contexts. Addressing them requires both leadership development and structural support for resources, professional learning, role clarity, and policy coherence.

The post-2020 concentration of publication, emerging HOD and sub-principal research, mixed-methods use, and theoretical experimentation indicate a developing field. The review identifies five priorities: geographic diversification, TVET research, longitudinal and explanatory designs, contextualised theoretical frameworks, and sub-principal leadership. These priorities arise from the patterns observed across the included studies.

The 30 non-indexed records also point to the importance of strengthening publication infrastructure so that relevant regional research can enter wider evidence syntheses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the five-priority research agenda established in this review, the following recommendations are offered for researchers, funders, journal editors, and policy-makers working in Sub-Saharan African educational leadership.

1. Funding bodies and continental organisations should support instructional leadership research capacity and indexed publication in under-represented Francophone, Lusophone, and conflict-affected contexts.
2. TVET instructional leadership should be developed as a distinct research programme, given the single indexed empirical study identified across 26 years.
3. Funding should support longitudinal and quasi-experimental designs capable of examining causal relationships.
4. Researchers should test contextualised frameworks, including Ubuntu, enactive sense-making, and distributed leadership, alongside established PIMRS-based approaches.
5. School and TVET leadership policies should address role clarity, administrative burden, delegated authority, and professional development as structural conditions for instructional leadership.



Ethics Clearance

This study involved no human participants and no primary data collection, and ethical approval was therefore not required.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions:

Baemedi Monthusi Kaisara: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, writing (original draft), writing (review and editing), project administration. Lebogang Tlalenyane: Validation, formal analysis, writing (review and editing). Baganetsi Moranda: Validation, writing (review and editing).

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The authors confirm that no generative AI or AI-assisted writing tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. All writing, synthesis, and analysis were undertaken solely by the named authors without the assistance of such tools

Data Availability Statement

The data extraction instrument, screening log, MMAT appraisal records, and supplementary review materials are available through the Open Science Framework repository associated with this review.

Registration: Open Science Framework (OSF): <https://osf.io/qr7ej>. No protocol deviations occurred

Supplementary Materials

Supplementary Table S1 (per-study MMAT quality scores), Supplementary Table S2 (per-study characteristics), and the data extraction table are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. All materials are also deposited in the OSF pre-registration repository: [OSF repository](https://osf.io/qr7ej) at <https://osf.io/qr7ej>

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