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Research Trends in Transformative School Leadership: A Systematic Review and Bibliometric Analysis

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly acknowledged that transformational leadership is an essential framework for understanding how school principals enhance teacher motivation, performance, and overall school development across a variety of settings. However, despite its proven advantages, the current body of research remains dispersed across methodological, institutional, and cultural boundaries, highlighting the necessity of an integrated synthesis. This study uses a hybrid methodological approach that combines a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer to map the trends, themes, and research fronts of transformational leadership among school principals. Using data from Scopus and PRISMA-guided methods, the study identifies networks of collaboration, intellectual structures, and new directions that influence the creation of theories, leadership development programs, and policy in educational leadership. According to the findings, transformational leadership has developed into a multifaceted framework that includes teacher empowerment, emotional intelligence, and adaptive digital competence, rather than being solely focused on morality and justiceThough it is constrained by its reliance on Scopus and English-language sources which may exclude important regional perspectives the integration of SLR and bibliometric methods offers a thorough understanding of the conceptual and empirical development of transformational leadership. This study emphasizes the importance of incorporating inclusiveness, ethical reasoning, and reflective practices into the development of policies and leadership training. Therefore, to better understand how transformational leadership concepts are contextually adjusted across various educational systems and cultural contexts, future research should examine longitudinal and cross-national studies.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Keywords:
bibliometric; education; principals; systematic literature review; transformative leadership

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INTRODUCTION

A crucial framework for understanding how school principals affect teacher performance motivation and the broader school culture is transformational leadership in education. Through intellectual stimulation, individualized attention, and a shared vision, principals who implement transformational leadership practices motivate teachers, encouraging creativity, teamwork, and professional development in schools (Kareem et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2025; Yan & Yuet, 2025). This leadership approach improves teachers' professional growth, increases their job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and inspires them to use creative and reflective practices (Firmansyah et al., 2022; Hardianto et al., 2025; Wiyono, 2017). Furthermore, transformational leadership emphasizes its role in fostering technologically adaptive, future-focused learning environments by contributing substantially to teachers' beliefs and competencies in integrating digital technologies

(Schmitz et al., 2023). Transformational leadership at the institutional level fosters a supportive school climate that encourages teamwork, unity of purpose, and ongoing development (Tran, 2025). It improves student achievement, school performance, and pedagogical quality when coupled with instructional leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003). Comparative studies show that effectiveness varies across cultural and sociopolitical contexts despite the generally positive results. Although meta-analytical evidence highlights the transformative leadership's consistent positive impact in Asia, it also highlights the need for additional research on the contextual robustness and variability of these effects (Firmansyah et al., 2022). Context-sensitive inquiry is crucial because research from Vietnam, Kuwait, and India shows that institutional structures and sociocultural norms influence leadership enactment in different ways (Almonawer et al., 2023; Kareem et al., 2023; Tran, 2025). The importance of psychosocial factors as major predictors of transformational leadership effectiveness, including emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and cultural intelligence (Espinosa et al., 2025). Collaborative professional environments mediate the association between transformational leadership and teacher performance according to research on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). This suggests that building collective capacity is essential to maintaining the impact of leadership (Roesminingsih & Windasari, 2025).

In conclusion, principal transformational leadership is a multifaceted process that promotes professional development, teacher empowerment, and school improvement. Nevertheless, current research indicates a knowledge gap regarding the ways in which contextual, cultural, and psychosocial factors impact its application and results. Therefore, comparative and longitudinal designs should be used in future studies to investigate how transformational leadership works across various educational systems, especially in developing nations. To further support the practice of transformational leadership, leadership development programs must incorporate emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and cultural responsiveness as fundamental competencies. Transformational leadership can develop into an empirically supported and contextually grounded model for promoting long-lasting educational change through such strategies.

A thorough grasp of this crucial area of educational leadership requires both bibliometric analyses and systematic literature reviews on transformational leadership and school principals. Researchers can provide an integrated view of how transformational leadership affects school culture, teacher motivation, and organizational effectiveness by combining qualitative and quantitative data from various studies using the SLR approach (Li, 2022; Heenan et al., 2023). SLRs use rigorous synthesis to uncover gaps, such as a lack of investigation into student-level outcomes and cross-cultural aspects, while also identifying consistent findings, such as the positive correlation between principals' transformational leadership and teacher collaboration (Li & Karanxha, 2024; Tran, 2025). These results highlight the need for further research using mixed-method designs to understand better the dynamics of transformational leadership across various educational contexts.

Simultaneously, bibliometric analyses map publication trends, authorship networks, and thematic evolution throughout the field, providing a potent quantitative tool to supplement SLR findings. By highlighting significant themes such as emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and cultural intelligence as critical factors influencing successful school leadership, they shed light on the theoretical framework of transformational leadership research (Espinosa et al., 2025; Ganjali & Mehdinezhad, 2016). Furthermore, bibliometric analyses show that researchers from nations such as the US, Canada, and Turkey are increasingly working together internationally, which reflects a globalized discussion on effective leadership (Ambon et al., 2025; Karakose et al., 2023). By providing co-citation networks and keyword clustering visualization tools, such as VOSviewer, these analyses are further improved and assist researchers in tracking the progression of research priorities from teacher professional development to school effectiveness (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019; Sidana et al.,

2024). Thus, a comprehensive research perspective is produced by integrating SLR and bibliometric techniques, which combine data-driven quantitative mapping with in-depth qualitative synthesis. This methodological synergy improves research efficiency and precision—bibliometric analyses direct SLRs by identifying high-impact sources and new research clusters while SLRs contextualize those findings by developing theories and critically interpreting them (Pan & Chen, 2021; Negara et al., 2024).

These strategies work together to create evidence-based policy recommendations and predictive frameworks for leadership development. Because of this, they not only promote scholarly research but also provide insights for leadership development initiatives that encourage creativity, cooperation, and ongoing enhancement in educational systems across the globe (Asad et al., 2022; Yan & Yuet, 2025). Examining the evolving field of research on transformative leadership among school principals and evaluating its importance in shaping the conversation and the creation of policies related to educational leadership are the goals of this study. It examines how different educational contexts have theorized, applied, and assessed the idea of transformative leadership. The study also seeks new themes, methodological strategies, and patterns of international cooperation that characterize this field's research fronts. In doing so, it offers a thorough understanding of how transformative leadership enhances student learning outcomes, teacher professionalism, and school culture.

RQ1: What are the main themes, patterns, and lines of inquiry that define the scholarly conversation about transformative leadership among school principals?
RQ2: What trends in cooperation and citation networks emerge in the field of transformative leadership research, and how are they distributed across nations, organizations, and methodological approaches?
RQ3: In order to guide and enhance future research and professional practice in transformative educational leadership, what theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and practical implications can be derived?

To address these questions, this study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combined with a VOSviewer-based bibliometric analysis. The SLR approach enables a thorough synthesis of existing studies on transformative leadership. It highlights conceptual patterns, theoretical contributions, and areas that need more exploration. This method helps improve our understanding of leadership dynamics by focusing on how they affect school effectiveness, teacher motivation, and educational innovation. Alongside the SLR, the bibliometric analysis quantitatively maps publication trends, citation networks, and thematic changes in the field. Using data from the Scopus database, VOSviewer software visualizes co-authorship, keyword co-occurrence, and citation relationships among studies published up to October 25, 2025. By integrating these methods, this study offers a broad overview of the knowledge structure and research paths, showing how scholarship in transformative leadership has developed and pointing out new directions for theory development, professional training, and policy-making in educational leadership.

The novelty of this study lies in its combined analysis of transformative leadership, specifically in school principalship. This area has received little systematic and bibliometric attention, even as it has become increasingly important in educational leadership research. By merging SLR and bibliometric techniques, this study maps publication growth and collaboration patterns while tracking the shift from normative social justice discussions to evidence-based, school-focused leadership practices. Unlike earlier leadership reviews that broadly cover transformational or instructional leadership, this study outlines the specific conceptual and methodological features of transformative

school leadership. It thus provides a clearer research roadmap for future theory development, leadership training programs, and evidence-based policy-making.

METHOD

To provide a thorough overview of the body of research on transformative leadership among school principals, this study uses a hybrid methodological framework combining bibliometric analysis and a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). To ensure transparency, analytical accuracy, and methodological replicability in the identification, selection, and synthesis of pertinent studies, the review process is conducted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines (Chotisarn & Phuthong, 2025). The inclusion parameters for the review comprise: 1) peer-reviewed journal articles published up to October 25, 2025, comprise the review's inclusion criteria; 2) English-language works, and; 3) research on transformative leadership in educational contexts with a focus on the role of school principals in promoting innovative participatory school cultures and driving organizational change.

Bibliometric analysis was performed using VOSviewer and Biblioshiny for R to visualize citation links, co-authorship relationships, and keyword co-occurrence patterns throughout the literature. In addition to tracking advances in themes and new research directions in the field, this analytical process seeks to identify the most significant writers, organizations, and nations that have contributed to the study of transformative leadership in education (Ni & Abdullah, 2025). This study's extensive synthesis of current empirical knowledge is made possible by combining bibliometric mapping and systematic review findings, which reveal the intellectual structures, thematic groupings, and knowledge gaps that guide future research (Marzi et al., 2025).

To guarantee a thorough yet targeted investigation of research on transformative leadership in schools, the search strategy was organized using a macro-to-micro sequence. To capture the variety of academic discussions and conceptual advancements at the nexus of leadership and school transformation, the terms transformative leadership and principal were used as the main search terms. The primary data source was the Scopus database, selected for its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications and its track record of reliability in bibliometric research. The study identifies the major contributors, cooperative research networks, and prevailing thematic clusters that characterize the scholarly conversation on transformative leadership among school principals, based on data from Scopus. All things considered, this hybrid methodological design not only organizes and synthesizes earlier research but also outlines the field's intellectual development and thematic pathways, providing insights to guide both scholarly investigation and the real-world development of transformative educational leadership.

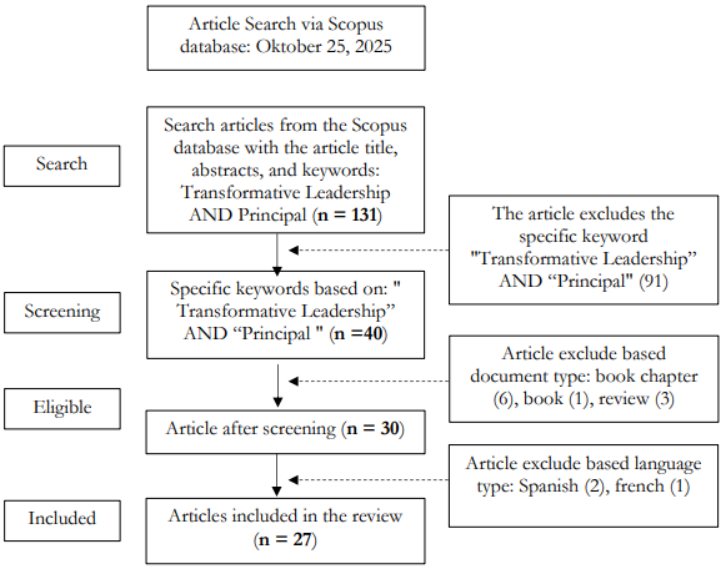

Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review information flow using PRISMA

The keywords Transformative Leadership and Principal were first identified in the article titles, abstracts, and keywords of 131 documents, as part of the article search conducted on October 25 2025, using the Scopus database (see Figure 1). 40 articles were left for in-depth examination after 91 documents were eliminated during the initial screening phase for failing to include both keywords. There were 30 eligible articles after 10 additional documents—including six book chapters, one book, and three review papers—were eliminated based on publication type. To ensure linguistic coherence and analytical clarity, three non-English publications—two in Spanish and one in French—were disqualified at the final eligibility stage. The primary research questions supporting this study on school principals' transformative leadership were addressed through a methodical review of the 27 selected articles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings are based on 27 articles on transformative leadership in school principals obtained from the Scopus database. In addition to looking at the annual distribution of publications, the journals that are most actively contributing to this field, and the development of thematic clusters over time, the bibliometric and systematic analyses cover publication trends from 2005 to 2025. Additionally, the study highlights the most significant contributors, such as renowned writers, associated universities, and nations that have significantly advanced the field of transformative educational leadership research. This thorough analysis offers profound insights into the themes, patterns, and new research directions in the field of school principals' transformative leadership. The results not only demonstrate the field's intellectual development but also provide a strategic framework for directing future research and professional practice in transformative school leadership.

The publication trend shows only 27 Scopus-indexed articles on transformative leadership among school principals from 2005 to 2025. This indicates that the field has developed slowly rather than quickly. This pattern aligns with bibliometric findings suggesting that new leadership ideas often undergo a lengthy period of development before gaining sustained academic interest (Merigó & Yang, 2017; Passas, 2024). The first publication appeared in 2005, marking an early stage in which transformative leadership was mostly discussed in the context of general organizational and transformational leadership, rather than in direct connection to school leadership. The limited output

between 2009 and 2017, with only 1 or 2 publications each year, further indicates that applying transformative leadership in schools required more time to build a solid theoretical foundation. Similar time delays have been found in other education-related bibliometric studies. In those studies, leadership concepts gained traction only after they were connected to system-wide reforms and policy priorities (Ambon et al., 2025). A similar trend was noted by Junaidi et al. (2025b), who reported that research in citizenship and religious education saw a significant increase in publications only after the subjects were linked to governance, curriculum changes, and social issues. From 2021 onward, the number of publications sharply increased, reaching a peak of six articles. This signals a shift from an emerging phase to a growth phase in research. This surge follows broader trends in leadership research, driven by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which have led to heightened scholarly interest in transformational, ethical, and socially responsive leadership within educational contexts (Jusoh et al., 2024; Wijayanti et al., 2025). Thus, the observed publication trend shows that transformative leadership among school principals has evolved from a little-discussed topic to an important area in educational leadership scholarship.

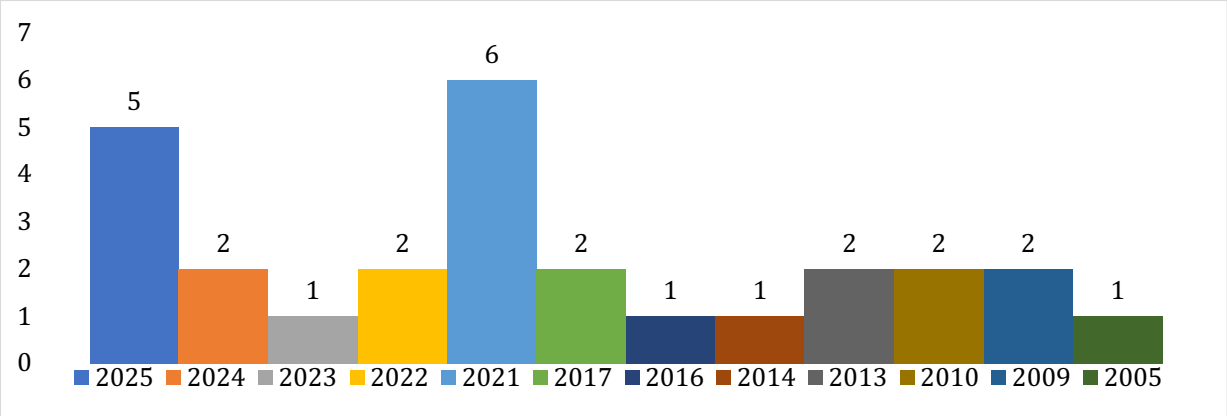

Figure 2. Number of Transformative Leadership of School Principals Publications

Research on transformative leadership among school principals has developed over the last 20 years, showing a dynamic trajectory. Early seminal works in the mid-2000s began to show how teacher development, mentoring, and leadership are related. Tillman (2005) was among the first to highlight the principal's role in facilitating cultural transmission and mentoring in urban schools, positioning mentoring as a crucial pathway for transformative leadership. This conceptual groundwork was further strengthened by Shields (2010), who methodically distinguished transformative leadership theory from transformational and transactional approaches and highlighted its dedication to social justice, democracy, and equity across a range of educational contexts. Scholarship broadened both conceptually and geographically in the ensuing ten years.

In the following decade, scholarship expanded geographically and conceptually. Dreyer and Hermans (2014) investigated the relationship between spirituality and school leadership in South African private schools, establishing a connection between moral character attributes and transformative learning environments. As the 2020s approached, research began using transformative leadership to address new socio-educational issues. Through community and cultural responsiveness, transformative practices foster inclusion for African American female students, according to Sampson and Clayton's (2021) analysis of principals' leadership in STEM-focused schools. The same was true for Tekleselassie & Roach's (2021) study of women in Ethiopian education, which showed how female principals used moral bravery and critical awareness to further a social justice cause in patriarchal educational systems. In recent research, transformative leadership has

been placed increasingly within broader frameworks of organizational change and teacher empowerment. Faridah et al. (2022) found that high-achieving principals who promoted teacher professionalism tended to adopt collaborative and transformative leadership styles. In the meantime, Ahmad et al. (2024) demonstrated how transformational and transformative leadership reduced stress and improved worker performance during the COVID-19 lockdown, broadening the conversation to organizational resilience. In African and Middle Eastern settings, Elmalak-Watad (2025) and Sesoane et al. (2025) made significant contributions: the former detailed the revolutionary tactics used by Arab school leaders to advance social mobility and equity, while the latter questioned authoritarian instructional leadership by proposing justice-driven, participatory leadership for long-term curriculum reform. Lastly, recent research has started to incorporate behavioral and psychological aspects into leadership analysis. Zedda et al. (2025) found a relationship between school principals' dispositional resistance to change and their self-efficacy, emphasizing transformative leadership as a mediating factor that promotes reform readiness and adaptive capacity. Together, these studies show how transformative leadership continually moves from theoretical conceptualization to empirical validation and contextual adaptation, highlighting its critical role in promoting teacher empowerment, equity, and long-term school improvement.

According to the bibliometric information obtained from the Scopus database, studies on school principals' transformative leadership have been conducted in several nations, demonstrating the topic's international applicability (see Figure 3). With 14 publications that greatly influence theoretical and empirical discussions in this field, the United States stands out as the most prolific contributor. Its longstanding tradition in educational leadership research and its focus on democracy, equity, and school organizational reform are highlighted by the United States' dominance. Following the US, South Africa, and Canada, exhibit active scholarly engagement with five and three publications, respectively, indicating a growing interest in context-sensitive, justice-oriented leadership models. Developing nations that contribute a variety of sociocultural and policy viewpoints to the conversation include China, Indonesia, Vietnam (each with 1 publication), Israel (2), Switzerland, Spain, Pakistan, the Netherlands, and others. This geographic distribution indicates that although scholarship on transformative leadership is still primarily focused in Western contexts, it is gradually spreading toward the Global South and Asia. This diversification shows that transformative leadership frameworks must be modified to fit local educational realities and cultural contexts.

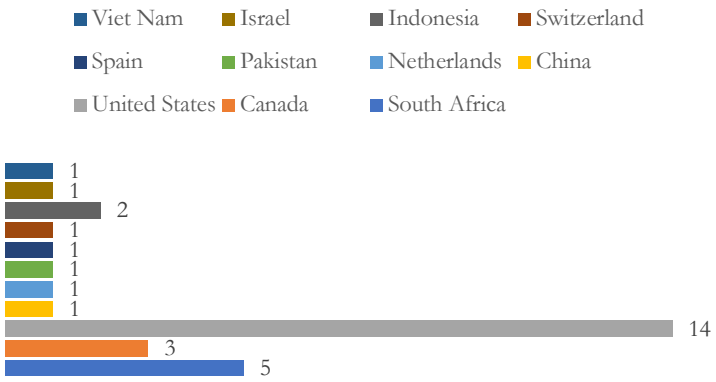

Figure 3. Number of articles by country or territory

The VOSviewer-based collaboration network shows that the United States is the central hub for international research on the transformative leadership of school principals. This reflects a well-known global trend in leadership and education research, in which countries in the Global North lead in producing knowledge and forming transnational partnerships (Mantry et al., 2023; Mohamud et al.,

2025). This central role fits with broader bibliometric findings that identify the United States as a major player in international scientific collaboration across various fields (Merigó et al., 2016). The strong collaborative ties among the United States, Canada, South Africa, and Spain suggest a growing dialogue that links Western educational systems with those facing postcolonial changes and social inequality. These North-South academic connections reflect trends identified by Junaidi et al. (2025a), who noted that collaboration across regions is crucial for developing context-sensitive and relational leadership frameworks in education. Canada's position as a secondary hub further emphasizes the role of mid-sized research systems in facilitating knowledge exchange between continents. Additionally, South Africa's connections with the Netherlands highlight the increasing importance of studies focused on equity in leadership and comparative approaches. Overall, this pattern of collaboration implies that while research on transformative leadership is primarily rooted in North American scholarship, it is increasingly influenced by transnational partnerships that prioritize social justice, diversity, and inclusive educational change.

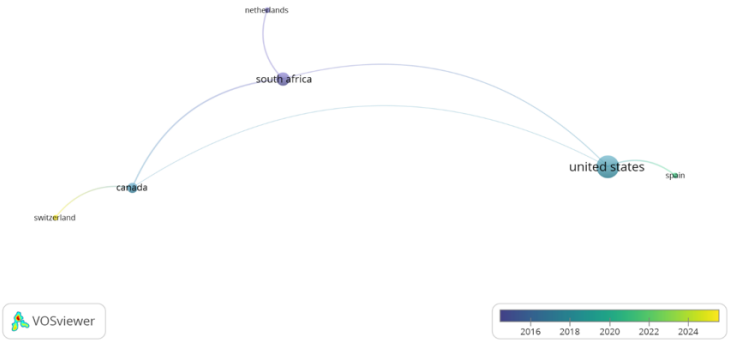

Figure 4. Network country visualization

Research on school principals' transformative leadership is distributed by institutional affiliation in a somewhat concentrated pattern, with several universities standing out as major contributors (see Figure 5). With three publications in the field, the University of South Africa is by far the most productive institution. Closely behind, two publications were produced by Universidad Católica de Valencia San Vicente Mártir and Florida Atlantic University, and by The University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University System, and George Washington University, each of which demonstrated an active interest in transformative leadership scholarship in a variety of educational contexts. The topics' interdisciplinary nature and worldwide interest were demonstrated by the one publication each from institutions such as the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, the Haute École Pédagogique du Canton de Vaud, and the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics.

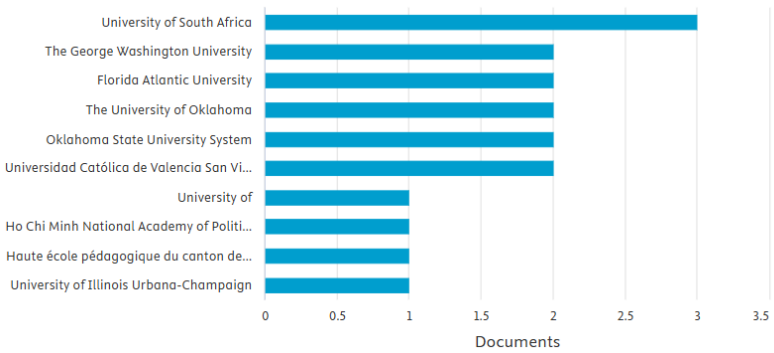

Figure 5. Number of articles by affiliation (top 10 affiliations)

The distribution of publications across academic journals shows a fairly balanced pattern, with Educational Administration Quarterly as the most prominent outlet. Its status as the leading source highlights its importance for high-impact research on school leadership, organizational change, and educational reform. Bibliometric studies consistently reveal that specialized leadership areas often focus early contributions in a few key journals before branching out to broader interdisciplinary publications (Ninkov et al., 2022; Valenzuela-Fernández et al., 2023). The work of the International Journal of Educational Management and Leadership and Policy in Schools also suggests that transformative leadership is increasingly looked at through managerial, policy-oriented, and systemic lenses. This finding matches Ambon et al. (2025), who noted that current research on school leadership increasingly includes organizational, instructional, and governance aspects. The presence of journals from psychology, education policy, and regional education studies—each with a single publication—indicates a growing interdisciplinary interest in transformative leadership. While the overall number of publications is still limited, the variety of journals reflects an early stage of spread, suggesting that discussions about school principals' transformative roles are reaching a broader academic audience and promoting global academic exchanges (Junaidi et al., 2025b).

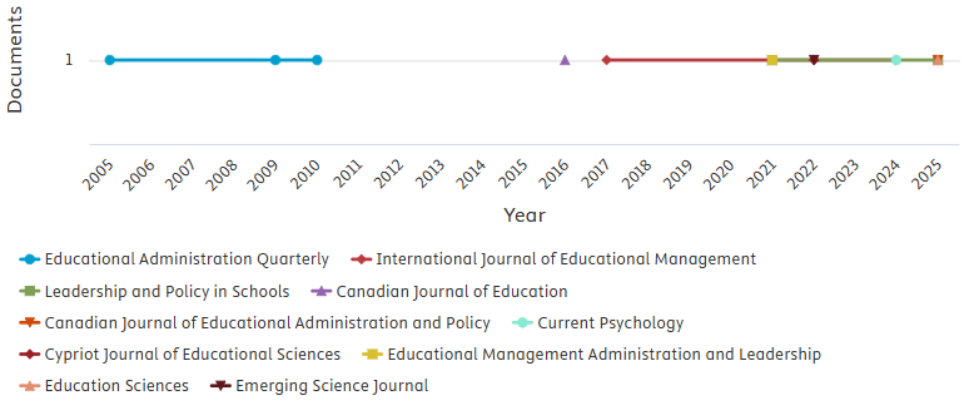

Figure 6. Number of articles by sources (top 10 sources)

The distribution of scholarly contributions by author reveals a decentralized and non-hierarchical research structure, with no single scholar exerting dominant influence. The most productive authors, who contributed two publications, indicate that knowledge production in this field is widely distributed across researchers and institutions. Such a pattern is characteristic of developing research domains and contrasts with mature fields where a small number of highly cited authors often dominate scholarly output (Tam et al., 2023). From a bibliometric perspective, this balanced authorship landscape suggests a pluralistic and collaborative knowledge-building process. It also implies a high degree of conceptual diversity, as multiple scholars contribute distinct theoretical lenses and methodological approaches. Zhao and Strotmann (2022) argue that the absence of author dominance often fosters intellectual openness and reduces paradigm lock-in, particularly in interdisciplinary leadership research. Accordingly, the observed authorship pattern indicates that transformative leadership of school principals is attracting attention from diverse academic contexts, enriching the discourse, and supporting the field's continued theoretical and empirical development.

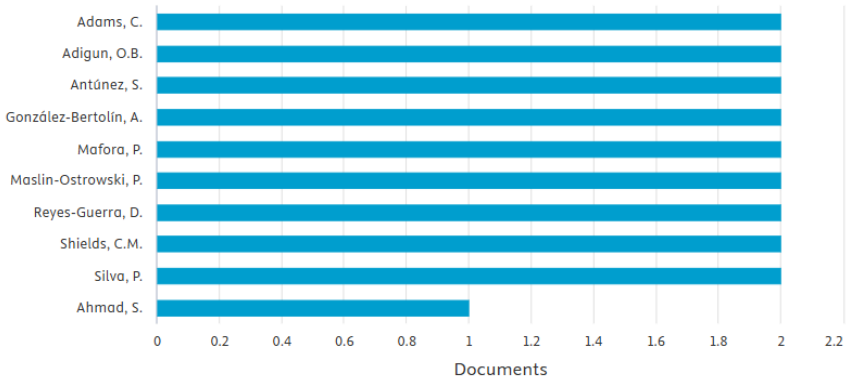

Figure 7. Number of Publications by Author (Top 10 Authors)

The keyword analysis provides important evidence for answering RQ3, which examines the theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and practical implications that can guide and enhance future research and professional practice in transformative educational leadership. According to the findings, most current research in this area is based on ideas that highlight justice, equity, and transformation in educational environments. The most frequently occurring term, transformative leadership, which appears 14 times, indicates a strong theoretical orientation toward leadership as a catalyst for systemic and value-based educational change. The term social justice, which appears 7 times, is closely associated with the incorporation of critical viewpoints that support equity and inclusivity in leadership practices.

Recurring terms like school principal, leadership, school leadership, and leadership style empirically suggest that a large portion of the literature currently in publication examines leadership roles and practices at the school level, with an emphasis on how leaders can improve equity and manage demographic change. Together, these themes reveal a growing academic focus on bridging theory and practice, illustrating how transformative leadership can create learning environments that are socially responsive, equitable, and flexible. Table 1 shows in detail how these keywords are distributed, which supports these theoretical and practical insights.

Table 1. Keyword by authors

Rank	Keyword	Occurrences	Total Link Strength
1	Transformative Leadership	14	14
2	Social Justice	7	11
3	School Principal	3	6
4	Equity	2	5
5	Leadership	6	4
6	Demographic Change	2	3
7	School Leadership	2	3
8	Secondary Schools	2	2
9	Leadership Style	2	0

The VOSviewer visualization provides insight into the conceptual relationships that influence the field, showing the co-occurrence network of keywords associated with transformative educational leadership. The map shows transformative leadership as the most central node, suggesting that this idea serves as the theoretical framework around which other related themes are organized. Strong ties to social justice, leadership, school principalship, and equity point to an integrated framework in

which the ideals of inclusivity, fairness, and moral responsibility in educational institutions are intimately linked to leadership transformation (see Figure 8).

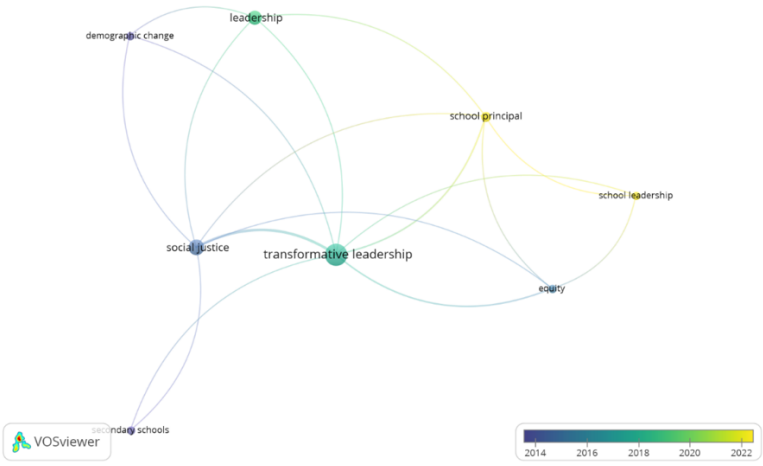

Figure 8. Co-occurrence framework and representation of key terms

The color gradient illustrates the temporal evolution of the research focus, going from blue (earlier studies circa 2014) to yellow (more recent works circa 2022). Prior research focused more on social justice and demographic change, reflecting early theoretical debates about diversity and equity. Recent studies, on the other hand, have moved toward applied contexts, focusing on school leadership and the school principal as focal points for putting transformative leadership practices into practice in actual educational settings. Furthermore, the clustering patterns suggest that research on transformative leadership has shifted from general discourses about morality and justice to more pragmatic, situation-specific uses in educational settings. Overall, this visualization lends credence to the idea that future research in transformative educational leadership should continue to fuse empirical insights on school-level leadership with social justice frameworks to create workable models that improve education's responsiveness, inclusivity, and transformative potential.

A bibliometric and systematic review of 27 articles on school principals' transformative leadership, indexed in Scopus, offers a thorough understanding of the theoretical and empirical developments in this field. By combining the advantages of bibliometric analysis and Systematic Literature Review (SLR) this study provides an organized understanding of the conceptual frameworks networks of collaboration and research trajectories that influence transformative educational leadership (Pulsiri & Vatananan-Thesenvitz, 2018), While bibliometric techniques offer a quantitative overview of intellectual patterns citation impact and thematic evolution (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2022; Vaishya et al., 2025). Together, these approaches uncover not only what has been studied but also how ideas have developed and interacted across global contexts.

The results show that, from a thematic perspective, scholarly interest in transformative leadership increased gradually but steadily between 2005 and 2025, following patterns seen in other developing areas of educational leadership (Mukhtar et al., 2025). Early studies conceptualized transformative leadership as a model distinct from transactional and transformational approaches, with a focus on ethics and justice, as demonstrated by Tillman (2005) and Shields (2010). This stage is consistent with Wang et al. (2024), who refer to what other fields call the conceptual formation phase, during which terminological definitions and ethical underpinnings predominate in academic discourse. The field underwent conceptual and geographic diversification between 2010 and 2020, embracing sociocultural, moral, and spiritual aspects (Dreyer & Hermans, 2014; Sampson & Clayton,

2021). This reflected the type of thematic branching frequently seen in bibliometric cluster analyses. The increase in empirical research following 2021 that links teacher empowerment and school improvement to leadership (Ahmad et al., 2024; Faridah et al., 2022) parallels the global trend toward applied research observed in other SLR-based reviews, such as ESG management (Mukhtar et al., 2025). This change indicates a stage of maturing research where conceptual discussions give way to operational and contextually adaptive approaches.

VOSviewer network mapping revealed patterns of collaboration and geographic distribution that highlight the global spread of transformative leadership research. In line with broader bibliometric findings highlighting the predominance of high-income countries in research production (Zhou et al., 2025), the United States is the leading country in this field, with 14 publications, followed by Canada and South Africa. These nations, which have democratic and equity-focused educational traditions, constitute what can be regarded as the intellectual center of transformative leadership studies. Nonetheless, the growing involvement of countries like China, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Indonesia represents a significant Southward expansion of scholarship. This development is also apparent in interdisciplinary reviews of green procurement (Wang et al., 2024) and innovation systems (Zhou et al., 2025). This trend shows that transformative leadership is being reframed within regional institutional and cultural realities rather than being limited to Western epistemologies. Reiterating results from other bibliometric studies that demonstrate rising academic productivity in developing regions, the University of South Africa's output prominence supports the role of Global South institutions in redefining justice-oriented leadership (Salari et al., 2025).

Keyword co-occurrence analysis offers an empirical glimpse of the field's conceptual framework. Transformative leadership: the central node with the strongest overall link has a direct connection to social justice, equity, and demographic change, demonstrating that the ethical and societal aspects of this paradigm are still fundamental. These connections resemble the dense clusters of keywords observed in research on ESG and AI for social good, where value-based concepts such as ethics or sustainability serve as the intellectual network's anchors (Chan & Nurrosyidah, 2025). Words like school principal leadership style and school leadership are becoming increasingly common, which emphasizes the growing empirical focus on leadership practice. The VOSviewer visualization (Figure 8) reflects the temporal mapping trends outlined by Ghorbani (2024), with yellow clusters representing more recent practice-based inquiries around 2022 and blue tones representing earlier studies that represent foundational discussions around 2014. This chronological color gradient demonstrates the field's transition from theoretical abstraction to applied reform-oriented strategies.

An enhanced understanding of transformative leadership as a conceptual and operational construct is thus enabled by integrating SLR and bibliometric insights. This combination, like other SLR–bibliometric syntheses (Thomas & Gupta, 2022), identifies understudied intersections alongside dominant frameworks. The development of transformative leadership is like a trend observed in broader management and education research, which emphasizes relational ethics, distributed leadership, and institutional resilience while moving away from moral prescription toward pragmatic adaptation. This trajectory demonstrates that transformative leadership is more than just a normative ideal; it is an actionable framework for systemic change. One strategy that prioritizes moral justice and human-centered change in education is transformative leadership. According to Shields (2010, 2012, 2017, 2023), transformative leadership aims to address social injustices and create inclusive and equitable learning environments rather than focusing solely on academic achievement. By fostering transformative consciousness that propels institutional and cultural change, this paradigm, which has its roots in social justice, empowers every member of the educational community through critical discourse, introspection, and cooperation (Escalante & Meetze-Hall, 2023; Van Oord, 2013).

The complexity of global educational issues, such as sociocultural diversity, digital transformation, and unequal access, has made transformative leadership more important in modern educational contexts, especially at the school level (Assefa & Mujtaba, 2025; Mulvaney et al., 2024). It is common for school principals who use transformative principles to center their leadership practices around social justice and equality (Escalante & Meetze-Hall, 2023; Shields, 2009, 2012). This dedication is demonstrated by their attempts to develop collaborative, participatory school policies, as well as safe and welcoming learning environments for all students, particularly those from underrepresented groups. Several interconnected dimensions allow for the identification of key traits of transformative leadership. First, according to praxis and activism, a leader's readiness to act on moral and theoretical reflection to confront unfair systems is indicated. Second conversation and investigation are crucial means of fostering critical thinking and collaborative decision-making (Van Oord, 2013). According to Espinosa et al. (2025), creating positive, compassionate organizational cultures and motivating school communities requires emotional intelligence and visionary ability. To help teachers and students see themselves as engaged democratic citizens, a transformative vision promotes cooperation, creativity, and empowerment (Shields, 2017).

A dedication to ongoing professional development is another essential component of transformative leadership. Lifelong learners and transformative leaders continuously encourage staff and teachers to advance their professional skills to handle new challenges (Assefa & Mujtaba, 2025; Espinosa et al., 2025). Technology plays a strategic role in this process, serving as a medium for increasing access to inclusive and responsive learning opportunities rather than just a tool (Mulvaney et al., 2024). Empirical studies across a variety of cultural contexts show how flexible transformative leadership is. It has been suggested that Kuwait use democratic and empowering leadership practices as a framework to address secondary education issues (Almonawer et al., 2023). Principals of private K–12 schools in China have adopted transformative leadership by placing a strong emphasis on instructional innovation, human development, and strategic direction-setting (Hou et al., 2025). Likewise, it has been found that combining transformative and instructional leadership improves student learning outcomes and strengthens school culture in South Africa (Shava & Heystek, 2021). These instances show that the fundamentals of transformative leadership—justice, equity, and empowerment—remain consistent even as their implementation varies across institutional and cultural settings.

Additionally, students' academic performance and civic engagement are positively impacted by transformative leadership. According to Fischer (2017) and Shields (2017), transformative leaders help students think critically and understand their social responsibilities as global citizens by cultivating reflective and collaborative school cultures. This method fosters a sense of community, professional well-being, and a common goal, all of which increase teacher motivation and performance (Firmansyah et al., 2022; Laursen & Weiss, 2025). These interactions work together to create synergy that improves the school's overall effectiveness.

To sum up, transformative leadership is a pragmatic approach and a conceptual framework for rethinking education as a force for social change. As a cultural, civic, and moral endeavor, it goes beyond the limited realms of academic achievement and instructional management to bring back the human element of education. Through its focus on justice, equity, and group empowerment, transformative leadership reinterprets education as a participatory space where communities, teachers, and students jointly create meaning and shared responsibility rather than merely as a means of dispensing knowledge. In this way, bringing learning into line with the larger goals of human dignity and democratic citizenship, challenging institutional hierarchies, and elevating marginalized voices, transformative leadership becomes an ethical undertaking. Transformational leaders establish the conditions for schools to become inclusive, introspective, and empowering spaces that respect

diversity and foster civic agency among all stakeholders by integrating social justice commitments, emotional intelligence, ongoing professional development, and adaptive technological literacy.

The practical implications of these findings highlight the increasing need for future research to strike a balance between contextual flexibility and theoretical depth. Although transformative leadership has strong conceptual underpinnings, its application varies widely across cultural and sociopolitical contexts. Therefore, comparative, and cross-national research should investigate how contextual realities, such as resource disparities, policy constraints, and cultural epistemologies, mediate leadership practices, and outcomes, especially in the Global South. This kind of research would deepen our understanding by establishing transformative leadership within local moral economies and values. Furthermore, to comply with the practice-oriented recommendations in recent meta-analyses, leadership preparation and professional development programs must purposefully incorporate competencies related to inclusivity, ethical reasoning, and teacher empowerment. In the end, this synthesis supports the notion that transformative leadership is a dynamic process grounded in context, informed by empirical research, and constantly reshaped by critical inquiry and reflective practice. It represents the meeting point of institutional action and moral purpose.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to compile the conceptual development, thematic inclinations, and methodological trends of studies on transformative leadership in educational settings. According to the findings, transformative leadership serves as a moral and civic framework that encourages equity, inclusivity, and empowerment in schools, in addition to being a managerial model. In addition to highlighting the global expansion of scholarship, especially in the Global South, the synthesis identifies important thematic clusters such as teacher agency, social justice, emotional intelligence, and adaptive digital competence. These results suggest that, to address the complex issues facing modern education effectively, educational leadership must incorporate contextual responsiveness and ethical reasoning. This study is important because it helps redefine educational leadership theory as a practice that bridges institutional change and social transformation while also being humanizing and justice-oriented. However, the current analysis is constrained by its reliance on literature indexed in Scopus, which might exclude studies published in other countries or not in English. To investigate how transformative leadership principles are applied in various educational and policy contexts, future research should use cross-cultural and longitudinal designs. It is practical to emphasize teacher empowerment, inclusivity, and ethical reflection as core competencies in leadership development programs. This study provides theoretical support for a dynamic model that connects moral purpose with organizational practice, thereby advancing transformative leadership. This ensures that educational reform stays rooted in justice, teamwork, and long-lasting social impact.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

The authors declare that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing process of this manuscript.

CONFLICTING INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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