



LANGUAGE AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract:

This literature review examines how language functions as a mechanism of educational leadership practice across K-12 and higher education contexts. Although leadership communication is widely recognized as important, the specific linguistic mechanisms through which leader language produces measurable institutional outcomes remain understudied. Using a Population-Concept-Context (PCC) eligibility framework and a purposive sampling strategy, together with Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, this review synthesizes fourteen peer-reviewed empirical studies published in English since 2020. The analysis identifies eight interrelated themes: motivational language and teacher self-efficacy; leadership communication and institutional trust; narrative and symbolism in leadership sensemaking; dialogue-based school leadership; emergency and crisis communication; gender, race, and equity in leadership discourse; inclusive and culturally responsive leadership discourse; and empathic communication and teacher burnout. Across these themes, findings consistently indicate that leader language actively shapes, rather than merely reflects, institutional trust, teacher self-efficacy, professional growth, and organizational climate. Communication mechanisms such as motivating language, inquiry-based dialogue, and narrative framing were found to influence whether teachers interpret leadership actions as trustworthy and inclusive or controlling and exclusionary. The review also identifies consistent methodological limitations across the literature, including reliance on self-reported data, limited longitudinal designs, and restricted cultural and geographic generalizability. The findings suggest that language should be treated as a teachable, measurable leadership competency and incorporated explicitly into leadership preparation and professional development programs. This review contributes to the growing recognition that communication is not incidental to educational leadership but constitutes it, and highlights the need for further cross-cultural, longitudinal research to establish the durability and international transferability of these findings.

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Keywords: educational leadership; leadership communication; motivating language; organizational trust; teacher self-efficacy; thematic literature review; school leadership discourse

1. Introduction

Leadership competency in educational organizations is progressively recognized as an essential language and communicative practice. Recent empirical studies' findings illustrate that leaders influence institutional outcomes, such as teacher satisfaction, school climate, student learning and organizational trust through strategic language use in daily interactions (Özdoğru & Sarier, 2024; Üztemur et al., 2026). Despite leadership communication remaining fundamental, specific mechanisms of leader language that produce measurable educational outcomes are understudied in recent empirical studies. This scholarly literature review uses a thematic analysis approach to address the research question, "What key themes related to language use in educational leadership practices are identified in existing literature?" The immediate sections evaluate recent empirical studies across K-12 and higher education contexts to determine patterns in how language and educational leadership shape organizational change. Unlike personality traits, language is learnable, measurable and has a direct impact on leadership effectiveness in educational institutions.

2. Methodological Approach

This literature review uses the Population, Concept, Context (PCC) research tool and thematic analysis as the methodology to extract information. The population includes educational leaders in formal administrative roles, including school principals, administrators, policymakers, teachers, and other educational leadership actors. The concept focuses on the roles and uses of language in educational leadership, including communication, discourse practices, and language-oriented leadership strategies, such as dialogue and framing. The contexts include educational settings such as schools, universities, and other educational institutions where leadership practices and language use influence educational processes. A purposive sample of fourteen (n=14) peer-reviewed empirical studies was selected using the PCC eligibility framework and explicit inclusion criteria, which focused on (1) studies emphasizing language or communication as a primary or secondary variable, (2) research conducted in education leadership or educational management contexts, and (3) empirical studies and scholarly sources published in English from 2020.

Thematic analysis was anchored in Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive protocol (Byrne, 2021). The initial phase involved coding the language patterns across the selected evidence, such as dialogue patterns, narrative identity analysis, and motivational patterns (Byrne, 2021). The codes were grouped into concepts and refined into themes through repeated review. Thematic saturation was achieved through iteration until there were no new language patterns, producing eight themes. Reflexivity was sustained

throughout the evidence extraction and acknowledged the authors' interpretations (Byrne, 2021). The analysis also highlighted the limitations in the evidence to inform future research. Thus, the hybrid deductive-inductive approach produced balanced guidance to source the strongest data through PCC and Braun and Clarke's six-phase protocol (Byrne, 2021; Chan et al., 2024; Peters et al., 2024).

3. Findings – Eight Interrelated Themes

3.1 Motivational Language and Teacher Self-Efficacy

Empirical studies show that a leader's language, defining problems as solvable, stressing optimism, and recognizing effort, produces noticeable improvements in job satisfaction and teacher self-reliance. Ozeren et al. (2020) found that principals' motivating language grounded in encouragement, affirmation, and a progressive outlook significantly predicted teachers' self-efficacy across low- and high-context cultures ($b = .10$, $p < .001$). How low-context successfully mediated the correlation between motivation and self-efficacy, as teachers from these cultures thrive in schools, where principals support open communication (Ozeren et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Holmes et al. (2021) employed structural modelling to illustrate how motivating language creates a medium that enhances superintendents' credibility and produces a measurable increase in principals' job satisfaction and district outcomes. Holmes et al. (2024) further indicated that educational leadership functions through communication, as principals apply motivating language, including direction giving, empathy, and framing to clarify goals, strengthen trust, and reinforce school culture, ultimately enhancing teacher motivations, self-efficacy, relationships, and organizational outcomes. The relationship appears more linguistic. Therefore, leadership development initiatives should teach these strategic language competencies.

Although the studies revealed the theme, they had limitations. Ozeren et al. (2020) relied on teacher self-report measures of efficacy and overlooked actual instructional changes in classrooms. Holmes et al. (2024) did not monitor or evaluate whether the enhanced district outcomes were sustainable after the study period. Some studies used significantly fewer schools, limiting generalizability to diverse districts (Holmes et al., 2021). The reported relationship between principals' motivating language and improved teacher self-efficacy suggests immediate application across K-12 contexts internationally, particularly in systems reporting teacher shortages, where this evidence offers a low-cost lever for improving retention. Despite the findings showing this theme is a robust language strategy, there are limited longitudinal studies evaluating whether motivation impacts actual instructional leadership in classrooms.

3.2 Leadership Communication and Institutional Trust

A structural equation model grounded in exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses indicated a positive correlation between organizational communication and teacher job satisfaction in primary schools (De Nobile & Bilgin, 2022). In particular, organizational communication promoting transparency, principal direction, support-giving and

inclusive decision-making created a culture in which teachers reported stronger commitment and higher trust in the leadership (De Nobile & Bilgin, 2022). Additionally, Din et al. (2022) found parallel mechanisms in higher education leadership development programs, in which leadership-related strategies, such as dialogue quality, predicted the strength of community cohesion, professional relationships, and interactions. There was a positive causal relationship between leadership communication and organizational trust, as communication practices, such as shared experience, storytelling, and reflective practice, led to significant improvements in organizational climate and trust (Din et al., 2022).

However, the studies did not assess how communication varied in diverse organizational contexts despite measuring communication frequency and quality. The study was conducted in the Australian context, requiring adaptation for other national systems, where interactions or trust-building approaches may vary. Din et al. (2022) explored communication and organizational trust in higher education, but failed to assess the downstream influence on students' outcomes or school performance. Additionally, the studies did not indicate the required frequency for building trust, or whether effective communication could address lower frequencies. Notably, this theme is relevant for school principals internationally who are managing strained schedules, as the growing reliance on digital communication in many education systems limits face-to-face interaction and stretches principal-teacher ratios.

3.3 Narrative and Symbolism in Leadership Understanding

Narratives and metaphors can help novice principals to make sense of their roles and leadership approach, showing the significance of language in educational leadership. Swen (2020) conducted a narrative inquiry by synthesizing interviewees' perspectives on sensemaking and examining how principals used narratives to understand their responsibilities through duty, calling, and fulfilment narratives. These influenced how principals understand roles, handle dilemmas, and communicate purpose to teachers in challenging situations (Swen, 2020). Thus, storytelling and metaphors shape leadership orientation and decision-making. Furthermore, Channing (2020) conducted a narrative to understand ethical leadership among women in higher education administration. The narrative analysis revealed that ethical leadership and philosophies emerged in the practice of women higher education leaders through narratives, as they explicitly narrated leadership embedded in ethics and relational responsibility (Channing, 2020). Through storytelling, leaders can evaluate and communicate their values and organizational identity, reflecting how communication shapes educational leadership (Channing, 2020).

Despite the studies revealing the relation between narrative and leadership sensemaking, there are notable limitations. Swen (2020) evaluated early-career principals in one US state, which could limit generalizability to other states or countries with different principal mentorship programs and educational policies. Furthermore, the evidence was grounded in principal self-reported narratives without considering the staff's perspectives to validate the influence of principals' narratives on school culture.

Channing (2020) emphasized women's leadership in higher education, underscoring the need to remain sensitive when applying the source to male-identified leaders or K-12 contexts. The sources did not examine whether narrative framing shifted with leaders' experience over time. This makes the theme broadly relevant wherever teachers transition into administrative leadership roles, a pathway common across many national systems and one often accompanied by high early-career turnover.

3.4 Dialogue and School Leadership

The existing literature emphasizes that dialogue is the primary leverage for teacher training and significantly supports professional growth more than directives. Adams et al. (2024) found that transformative conversation helped principals achieve greater teacher vitality outcomes ($b = .26$) and job satisfaction than directive conversation. Thus, the school environment and communication practices influence teacher vitality. Teacher vitality determines their commitment, satisfaction, performance, and institutional outcomes. Miranda (2024) found that leaders who engage in oral dialogue reported higher professional wellness scores and adopted instructional transitions with greater fidelity. Regular oral dialogue about educational issues helps reduce emotional distress, stress, and anxiety among educational leaders. In particular, effective transformational conversation employs open questions, true responsiveness to teacher thinking, and collaborative language, indicating shared authority. This theme influences both job satisfaction and instructional quality, as oral dialogue rooted in inquiry language predicts quantifiable changes in classroom settings.

The sources had some notable limitations. Adams et al. (2024) relied on self-report surveys to measure teacher vitality in underperforming urban schools without triangulating classroom-observed data to determine whether the transformations translate to teaching practices. Additionally, the source did not address teachers' experience, which may shape their responsiveness to the structured oral dialogue and the outcomes of the inquiry. Although Miranda (2024) evaluated the influence of dialogue on professional wellness, the source overlooked the impact of the outcomes on long-term job satisfaction or teacher retention. The sources did not provide protocols for principals to develop inquisitive oral dialogue competence, limiting their adoption. Overall, in education systems where standardized testing and accountability pressures dominate, a pattern increasingly common internationally, dialogue-oriented strategies appear well placed to improve leadership effectiveness and teacher wellness by easing the tension between support and accountability.

3.5 Emergency Communication and Contextual Leadership Language

Delivering information during a crisis reflects leaders' ability to tailor support to varying contexts, such as colleges, while paying attention to organizational challenges and the psychological needs of staff and students. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a measurable opportunity to evaluate how leader communication influences institutional adaptation. Burch et al. (2022) examined the decision-making framing among academic leaders during COVID-19. Findings show that trust was crucial for

effective leadership. Therefore, early-career principals who balanced clear, directive communication with care, adapted their communication style to the context, reduced uncertainty, reinforced trust, and produced measurable organizational responses more than those who emphasized directive language during the pandemic (Burch et al., 2022). Furthermore, Fernandes et al. (2023) used a narrative inquiry approach to explore organizational and individual leadership grounded in emotional intelligence, agility, and adaptability during the COVID-19 crisis. Findings indicated that emotional intelligence is crucial for leadership during rapid transitions or crises. Thus, crisis communication effectiveness requires flexible, adaptive and agile educational leadership, reflecting the underlying interconnection among clarity, immediate decisions, and long-term organizational goals (Fernandes et al., 2023).

However, the sources had some limitations, such as analyzing emails and announcements without assessing the emotional responses or implementation fidelity (Burch et al., 2022). The study was conducted in higher education, where emergency communication is structured, which may vary in K-12 school contexts. While Fernandes et al. (2023) explored themes in crisis communication, the source did not measure key indicators of student engagement or learning continuity during the crisis. The sources left unclear whether emergency communication patterns sustained institutional trust post-crisis, and how staff experienced the adaptive dynamic messaging. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning and staff wellness across nearly all education systems worldwide, the findings suggest that principals' clear directional language and situational leadership can sustain teacher engagement more effectively than crisis-alert messaging alone, regardless of national context.

3.6 Gender, Race and Equity in Leadership Conversation

Leadership discourse demonstrates and strengthens power dynamics. Educational leaders from marginalized populations navigate leadership scenarios that might undermine their authority, requiring them to apply language to demonstrate competence and assert belonging. In particular, Lewis-Strickland (2021) and Channing (2020) highlighted communication mechanisms, such as code-switching, in which leaders tailor language and communication style to the audience and contextual factors, such as gender and ethnicity. Although language shift remains strategic, it carries an emotional burden that might affect leaders' wellness and performance over time. Thus, institutions that evaluate contexts and adapt their language and communication styles are significantly more successful in leadership roles.

The findings illustrate participants' narratives of belonging, the documentation of key influencers in decision-making and increased retention rates among leaders from marginalized populations. For example, Lewis-Strickland (2021) found that Black women university deans perceived leadership resilience as influenced by experiences that fostered personal growth, self-reflection, and responsiveness to feedback. Overall, these experiences enabled them to address leadership challenges while deepening their understanding of leadership resilience.

Not only did the studies rely on self-reported data without triangulating with organizational data on hiring, promotion, and resource allocation, but they also left unclear whether clear naming of inequitable communication patterns provoked defensive responses from the majority of faculty. Additionally, Lewis-Strickland (2021) did not assess the impact of code-switching on leaders' long-term wellness and job satisfaction. Channing (2020) focused on the broader experience of women administrators, reducing the specificity of that experience. Across education systems where leadership demographics do not reflect the diversity of the student population, a pattern documented in multiple countries, the communication style of principals and deans can either reduce or reproduce existing power dynamics. Thus, the evidence suggests that institutional attention to the stakeholders whose perspectives are considered in leadership communication is crucial for developing equitable leadership mentorship.

3.7 Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Leadership Discourse

Leadership language can support or undermine cultural identities, values, and diverse ways of knowing. Lewis-Strickland's (2021) qualitative narrative evaluation of the Black women university deans' experiences indicated that organizational language marginalized the deans' identities, required counter-narratives of belonging and competence, such as effective communication. Diversifying leadership is essential for mentorship sessions that will enable students to thrive across cultures (Lewis-Strickland, 2021). However, women should actively draw on inner resources, such as speaking up, introspection, and using feedback loops, to enhance their leadership development. This approach strengthens inclusive and culturally responsive leadership language within institutions, thereby increasing women's representation in language and educational leadership more broadly.

However, Lewis-Strickland (2021) did not measure how women deans' counter-narrative work affected employment and resource allocation decisions. The study relied on self-reported data, failing to consider organizational data on the actual transformations in the decision-making process and outcomes for marginalized groups. Furthermore, the source examined Black women deans' experiences, overlooked emerging leaders from other underrepresented groups, and did not clarify whether the narratives created resistance for the majority administrators and faculty group (Lewis-Strickland, 2021). In schools with culturally diverse student and teacher populations more broadly, principals' language can either support or undermine culturally responsive educational strategies. Therefore, the theme suggests that a clear, deliberate naming of key decision-making influencers is crucial for building trust with stakeholders and families from historically underrepresented groups.

3.8 Empathic Communication and Teacher Burnout

Need-supportive communication is crucial in rural areas as principals often face challenges that worsen during emergencies. In particular, principal language that promotes teachers' emotional needs significantly enhances teacher health and

engagement outcomes. Hayes et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study to evaluate leadership practices in rural schools, especially at the onset of COVID-19. They found that constant communication grounded in caretaker roles, such as promoting the socio-emotional well-being of teachers and providing social-emotional support for teachers, students, and families, informed decision-making to enhance self-resilience among rural school principals, advocating for resources and a constant yet calming presence, led to a measurable decrease in teacher burnout. Tatang et al. (2021) also illustrated that principals' communication styles anchored in recognition of teacher perspectives, respect, and active listening were associated with lower teacher burnout and higher work motivation.

While the studies provided sufficient evidence for the relationship between leader language and educational leadership in rural schools, they also had notable limitations. Hayes et al. (2021) focused on rural contexts, potentially limiting generalizability to urban schools and stable conditions. Both sources relied on teacher-reported outcomes without assessing retention rates to validate findings. Additionally, the sources did not evaluate whether contextual factors, such as teacher experience or initial relationship with the leaders, influenced the outcomes of the constant communication and reactions to the support. In rural and under-resourced school contexts internationally, which frequently report teacher shortages and elevated burnout, principals' language appears to play a meaningful role in retention. Despite limitations, the findings indicate that responsive, need-supportive communication sustains educational leadership, especially teacher engagement in both unstable conditions and during a crisis.

4. Discussion

These eight interconnected themes reveal a clear picture illustrating how leader language is not only a byproduct of leadership but also an integral part of it, as leadership communication influences and defines leadership. The patterns across the literature show that language does not just convey leaders' intentions and expectations, but it actively influences how the institutions respond. The communication mechanisms across the empirical studies illustrate that leaders' particular language patterns, such as motivating language, inclusive framing of challenges, inquiry-based dialogue and narrative clarity, influence whether teachers interpret a leader's actions as trustworthy or controlling, whether their input is genuinely valued or overlooked, and whether the school environment or learning contexts feel inclusive and considerate or exclusive and marginalizing.

The patterns consistently demonstrate how leader communication enhances teachers' self-efficacy, strengthens organizational trust, deepens understanding of responsibilities, supports professional growth and ethics. It shows that leader language fosters an environment that supports inclusivity and equity in educational leadership. This interpretation triggers psychological and cognitive responses, such as professional growth, trust and a sense of belonging, which produce observable, measurable outcomes, including instructional quality, retention, and school climate. While there is variation in

context, the primary communication mechanisms are consistent across the 14 empirical studies from diverse settings, indicating strong, transferable strategies. Thus, the communication mechanisms identified here appear broadly transferable across national education systems, strengthening the relationship between language and educational leadership and enhancing outcomes; further cross-cultural validation is nonetheless warranted, as noted below.

5. Recommendations

Based on the synthesized evidence, several practical and research recommendations emerge. First, leadership preparation and professional development programs should explicitly teach language-based competencies, including motivating language, narrative framing, and inclusive dialogue, as core leadership skills rather than treating communication as an implicit, unteachable trait. Second, districts and institutions should invest in structured mentorship that pairs novice principals with experienced leaders to model effective narrative sensemaking and crisis communication. Third, future empirical research should prioritize longitudinal and multi-method designs, combining self-report with classroom-observed or organizational outcome data, to establish whether the language-outcome relationships identified here are sustained over time and translate into instructional practice. Fourth, given that the majority of reviewed studies originate from Western, English-language contexts, cross-cultural and comparative research is needed to test the transferability of these themes across diverse international education systems. Finally, institutions should consider the emotional and identity-related costs that leaders from marginalized groups may bear when adapting their language for institutional acceptance, and should build organizational structures that share this burden rather than placing it solely on individual leaders.

6. Conclusion

This review affirms that language is a primary driver of leadership influence, not as an outer communication skill, but shapes and defines leadership practice itself. Strong language often leads to desired educational leadership outcomes. Therefore, mentorship and professional development should clearly outline language patterns, make them measurable, and teach specific language skills, such as motivating language, narrative inquiry and inclusive framing of challenges, alongside theoretical knowledge. Leadership preparation should deepen leaders' understanding of how their language influences institutional culture and outcomes.

However, research gaps remain in leadership language in higher education, the long-term effects on student learning, and cross-validation of the identified themes and their interactions across cultures and diverse backgrounds, particularly outside the Western, English-language settings that dominate the current evidence base. Recent empirical studies show that leaders influence institutional outcomes through strategic and intentional use of language. The patterns were consistent across varied contexts,

reflecting a strong relationship between language and educational leadership. This indicates a strong potential for immediate application in leadership mentorship and practice internationally.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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