

The Effects of Leadership Quality on Organizational Success: Insights from Private International Schools

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Abstract

Effective leadership is essential for achieving success in private international schools. Beyond academic achievements, organizational success is reflected in teacher retention, financial stability, and institutional reputation, which signify the overall health and sustainability of these institutions. As international education becomes more competitive and culturally diverse, there is an urgent need for visionary, flexible, and capable school leaders. This research aimed to explore how different leadership styles—transformational, transactional, and distributed affected performance measures in a representative sample of private international schools from China, Thailand, Singapore, and the USA. Utilizing a strong mixed-methods approach, this research quantitatively analyzes data from structured surveys and qualitatively assesses information gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Data from 320 respondents, including teachers, administrators, and school leaders, were supplemented by in-depth interviews with 10 senior education professionals regarding leadership behavior. Document analysis, which included strategic planning and performance reports, was utilized in triangulation and provided an institutional context. The findings suggest that transformational and distributed leadership styles are more effective in achieving organizational excellence, which is characterized by a combination of high academic performance, teacher satisfaction, financial stability, and a positive institutional reputation. These leadership styles effectively motivate teachers and stakeholders while being culturally appropriate. During times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and strategic vision become crucial for leaders. Those who embody these qualities often achieve better academic results, higher staff retention, and increased stakeholder trust. Some challenges remain, including fragmented regulations, staff diversity, and the pressures of international accreditation standards. This study contributes to

the global discourse on educational leadership by presenting empirically grounded, regionally contextualized insights into the dynamics of effective leadership in international schools, with practical implications for school administrators and policymakers. These include recommendations for investment in leadership training, development of cross-cultural competencies, and data-informed decision-making. The study concludes that leadership quality is more than just a matter of management, as it is a strategic imperative for long-term sustainability in an ever-changing world of international education.

Keywords

Educational Leadership, Private International Schools, Transformational Leadership, Organizational Success, Teacher Retention, Mixed-Methods Research, Cross-Cultural Management

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Educational leadership is increasingly recognized as a strategic imperative, particularly within private international schools, where global competition intersects with cultural diversity and elevated parental expectations (Leithwood, 2021; Alhebshi et al., 2022). These institutions differ from public schools in several ways. While public schools adhere to national education policies, private international schools are required to comply with specific international standards and often contend with conflicting demands from various curricula. Furthermore, these schools face challenges related to funding, which are often contingent upon enrollment figures (Tien et al., 2020). Hayden & Thompson (2020) contend that international schools are both products and catalysts of globalization, thereby rendering leadership quality crucial for their sustained success. Similarly, Bunnell (2020) emphasized that leadership within international schools must adapt global theories to local practices, underscoring the necessity for flexible and context-sensitive leadership strategies. Within this context, factors such as leadership quality are directly pertinent to academic outcomes, organizational sustainability, staff commitment, and institutional branding (Akdere & Egan, 2020; Rehman & Iqbal, 2020). Ahmed & Al Amiri (2022) underscore the impact of transformational leadership by founding leaders in the UAE, which has cultivated a legacy of institutional resilience and innovation. This highlights the critical role of visionary leadership in achieving success in schools.

The increasing globalization of educational mobility has transformed international schools into centers of cultural convergence and market-driven accountability. These institutions necessitate leaders who possess a profound understanding of pedagogical excellence, demonstrate resilience and intercultural competence, and exhibit strategic foresight (Ghavifekr & Ramzy, 2020; Gallos & Bolman, 2021). The leadership crisis during the pandemic's challenging times highlighted

the critical importance of adaptability, emotional intelligence, and data-driven decision-making in effective crisis management (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021; Francisco & Nuqui, 2020).

1.2. Defining the Quality of Leadership in Private International Schools

Leadership quality is a multifaceted concept encompassing strategic vision, instructional leadership, emotional competence, and the capacity to mobilize and retain high-performing teams (Day et al., 2020; Alzoraiki et al., 2023). In the context of international schools, leadership must effectively manage a multicultural staff, align global pedagogical standards with local expectations, and cultivate an inclusive organizational climate characterized by elevated levels of trust (Obeid, 2024; Budur, 2020). Leadership effectiveness is thus a function of the interaction between style, context, and institutional capacity within a dynamic system of interplay (Kwan, 2020; Nurabadi et al., 2021). Distributed and transformational leadership models have been widely adopted to foster a shared purpose and promote innovation within diverse school settings (Alessa, 2021). These leadership approaches, which emphasize empowerment, teacher autonomy, and shared decision-making, particularly in settings characterized by high autonomy, such as international schools (Birasnav et al., 2023; Kızıloğlu, 2021), foster a sense of unity and alignment.

1.3. Organizational Effects of Leadership

Empirical studies have provided evidence both for and against the idea that the quality of leadership directly influences school performance indicators, such as student learning outcomes, staff retention, innovation capacity, and fiscal viability (Nguyen et al., 2021; Purwanto et al., 2023). Poorly aligned leadership can create gaps between internal configurations, leading to fragmentation, increased levels of burnout, and a decline in trust among stakeholders (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021). Conversely, robust leadership is crucial for cultivating collaboration and trust, which subsequently fosters a positive and motivated school environment. Bryk & Schneider (2021) further emphasize that trust serves as a crucial resource for school improvement, linking leadership behaviors to teacher commitment and organizational performance. Effective leadership acts as a cohesive force that sustains a culture of attracting talented teachers, promotes collaboration, facilitates change, and maintains a student-centered focus (Williams et al., 2020). Educational researchers, policymakers, school administrators, and graduate students must recognize these potential influences and be prepared to navigate them effectively.

1.4. Research Gap and Significance of the Study

Despite the extensive body of literature on educational leadership, a notable gap persists in understanding the complex relationship between leadership quality and

organizational success within private international schools in Asia and the United States. This gap is critically important, as existing research predominantly relies on public sector studies or Western-centric models that may not adequately reflect the unique dynamics of international education in countries such as China, Thailand, and Singapore (Hallinger, 2021; Alayoubi et al., 2020).

This research aims to bridge this gap by investigating the influence of leadership styles and characteristics on organizational outcomes, as evidenced by operational indicators such as academic success, teacher retention, and organizational resilience. Conducted in one of the most rapidly developing regions for private international schools, Asia, this study has the potential to provide actionable insights that can shape the design of leadership development programs and policy frameworks globally, drawing from the perspectives of school leaders, administrators, and academic literature.

1.5. Objectives of the Research

With these objectives in mind, the study will focus on the following areas, which have direct implications for the field of educational leadership:

- 1) Identify the leadership styles and traits that are most effective in private international school settings, utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods.
- 2) Analyze the relationship between leadership quality and organizational outcomes, such as staff satisfaction, financial stability, and academic achievement.
- 3) Explore the barriers and facilitators to effective leadership within culturally diverse and market-driven international school settings, providing insights that can inform leadership practices in similar educational contexts.

1.6. Research Question

How does the quality of leadership impact the success of private international schools in Asia?

2. Literature Review

Leadership quality in educational institutions has been a central research topic within management, psychology, and the educational sciences. This section critically analyzes the theories that underlie educational leadership and discusses empirical findings related to the effects of leadership, as well as the less obvious factors that influence leadership success within private international schools. Attention is concentrated on schools in Asia and the USA, as each adaptive view arising from either context offers intriguingly contrasting insights into the dynamics between leadership quality and organizational outcomes.

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks of Leadership

Educational leadership is a dynamic field with the capacity to effect substantial changes. The principal theories, including transformational, transactional, dis-

tributed, and servant leadership, extend beyond mere academic constructs to serve as potent instruments capable of enhancing teaching quality, student achievement, teacher retention, and organizational culture. [Robinson et al. \(2020\)](#) provide strong evidence linking effective school leadership to improved student outcomes, highlighting the significance of these frameworks in fostering institutional success.

Transformational leadership, initially conceptualized by Burns in 1978 and further developed by Bass in 1985, seeks to cultivate a vision by inspiring individuals to be innovative and to exercise their autonomy. This leadership style is particularly suited to international school environments that prioritize innovation and personalized learning ([Alessa, 2021](#)). In contrast, transactional leadership is based on hierarchical authority with clearly defined systems of reward and punishment. In settings where operational efficiency is paramount, such as highly structured private schools, it may secure compliance, but often at the cost of innovation ([Birasnav et al., 2023](#)). Distributed leadership, on the other hand, emphasizes a collaborative model of authority shared among multiple stakeholders, and it has been widely implemented in multicultural and teacher-driven school settings ([Kızıloğlu, 2021](#)). Ultimately, servant leadership emphasizes ethical stewardship, emotional intelligence, and prioritizing community well-being, making it especially beneficial in inclusive school environments ([Eva et al., 2019](#); [Ghavifekr & Ramzy, 2020](#)).

Table 1. Overview of leadership theories and their core characteristics.

Leadership Style	Core Characteristics	Typical Application
Transformational	Vision-driven, inspiring innovation, and motivating beyond expectations	International/Private Schools, USA & Asia
Transactional	Structured, goal-oriented, reward-based compliance	Bureaucratic institutions, finance units
Distributed	Shared authority, team-based decisions, and collaborative accountability	Multicultural teams, teacher-led schools
Servant	Focuses on staff/student well-being, an ethical foundation, and trust-building	Faith-based schools, ethics-focused systems

Source: Adapted from [Eva et al. \(2019\)](#), [Ghavifekr & Ramzy \(2020\)](#).

In summary, **Table 1** offers a comparative overview of the key leadership models pertinent to this study.

2.2. Leadership in Schools

Leadership is consistently identified as the second most critical factor influencing student outcomes, following teaching quality. Extensive studies have demonstrated that principals and school heads significantly influence learning environments by establishing expectations, supporting instructional practices, and fostering collaborative professional cultures ([Leithwood et al., 2020](#); [Day et al., 2020](#)).

In international school contexts, these roles are magnified due to the cultural diversity of staff and students, as well as the complex accountability frameworks (Alhebshi et al., 2022; Gallos & Bolman, 2021). The challenges for leadership are even more pronounced in private international schools, where leaders must navigate cultural pluralism, language barriers, and contrasting regulatory requirements in the two countries. Research emphasizes that effective school leaders in such environments require both cultural intelligence and the ability to bridge global pedagogical expectations with local practices (Hallinger, 2021; Obeid, 2024; Budur, 2020). Without these competencies, schools risk experiencing fragmentation, low morale, and reduced trust among their stakeholders (Nguyen et al., 2021). Evidence also suggests that visionary and inclusive leadership practices foster trust and motivation among teachers, thereby enhancing their job satisfaction and retention (Akdere & Egan, 2020; Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021). In both American and Asian international schools, transformational and distributed leadership approaches have been shown to increase teacher engagement and student outcomes, underscoring their effectiveness in multicultural educational contexts (Torlak et al., 2022; Alayoubi et al., 2020).

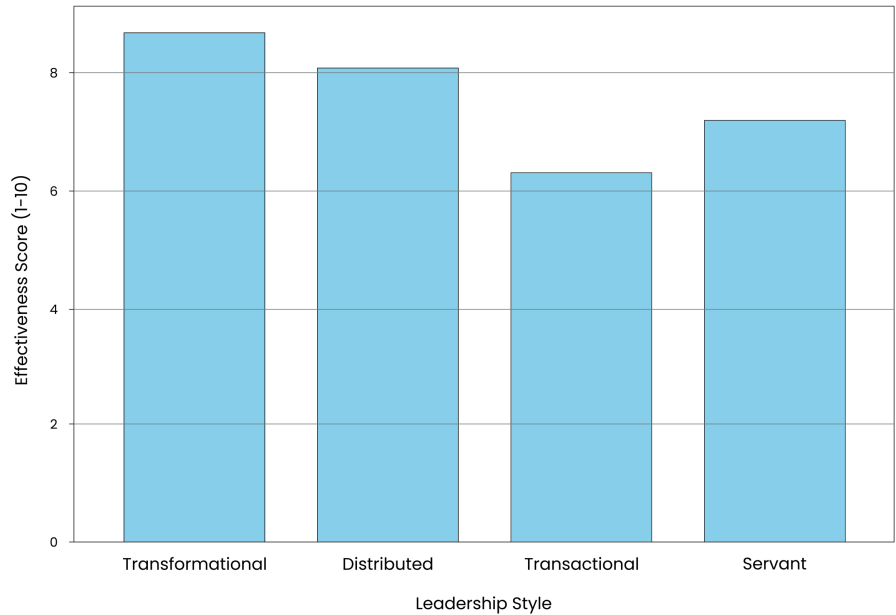
2.3. Leadership and Organizational Success

Organizational success in private international schools is contingent on a synthesis of academic outcomes, student enrollment, and financial stability. Recent studies have established a robust correlation between leadership quality and these performance domains, indicating that effective leadership contributes significantly to institutional resilience and growth (Nguyen et al., 2022; Rehman & Iqbal, 2020).

Academic Performance: Schools guided by transformational leaders consistently demonstrate superior academic achievement. These leaders not only inspire teachers to innovate in curriculum delivery but also establish clear expectations that align with broader institutional objectives (Day & Gu, 2020; Nurabadi et al., 2021). This congruence between vision and practice enhances teaching quality and cultivates a high-performance culture. **Figure 1** illustrates the comparative impact of leadership styles on academic outcomes, underscoring the evidence base for prioritizing transformational and distributed models in international schools.

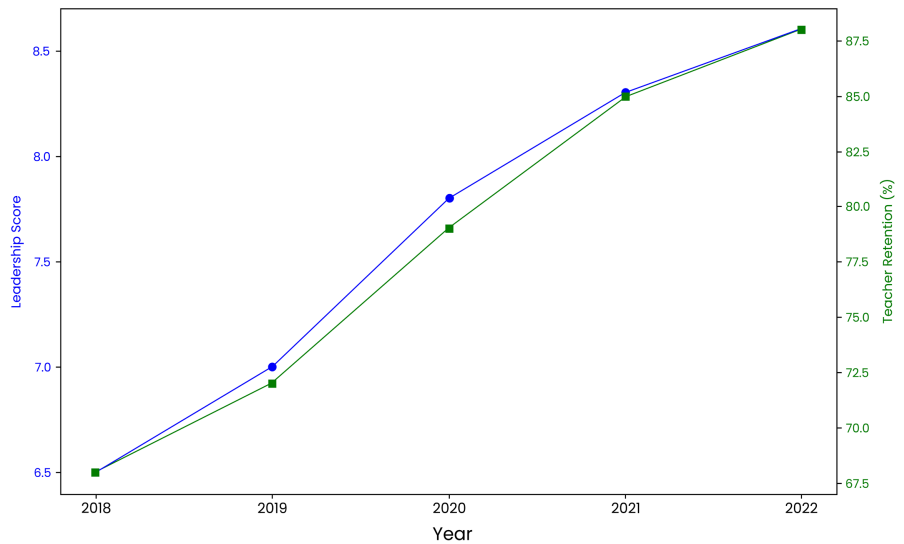
Figure 1 presents visual comparisons of the effects of leadership styles on academic indicators in international settings. Teacher retention is significantly influenced by leadership, which is crucial for maintaining institutional stability. Effective leadership styles are associated with reduced burnout and increased job satisfaction (Purwanto, 2022; Sahibzada et al., 2022). Inayat & Khan (2021) highlighted the strong correlation between job satisfaction and organizational performance, underscoring the necessity of supportive leadership for long-term retention. Similarly, Odland & Ruzicka (2021) identified leadership practices as central factors affecting teacher turnover in international schools, emphasizing the importance of emotionally intelligent leadership. Beyond retention, leadership quality affects broader organizational effectiveness. Burhan Ismael et al. (2021) contend that training and development initiatives serve as critical mediators linking leadership

to performance, underscoring the importance of continuous capacity building. Furthermore, MacDonald (2020) emphasizes that financial management strategies in private international schools are closely linked to leadership decisions, particularly in fee-dependent institutions where sustainability is paramount. Figure 2 illustrates the clear relationship between leadership quality and teacher retention over time in select international schools in Asia.



Source: Aggregated data adapted from Leithwood et al. (2020), Nurabadi et al. (2021), and Kwan (2020).

Figure 1. Comparative impact of leadership styles on academic performance in private international schools.



Source: Modeled data from Alzoraiki et al. (2023), Nguyen et al. (2022), Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn (2021).

Figure 2. Correlation between leadership quality and teacher retention over time.

A positive trend is evident, indicating an increase in teacher retention accompanied by improved leadership quality.

Organizational Culture and Financial Sustainability: Effective leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the cultural framework of educational institutions by articulating values and consistently modeling appropriate behavior. Additionally, it involves stakeholders in decision-making processes that enhance institutional trust. Empirical evidence from both the United States and Asia indicates that schools with robust leadership experience higher enrollment rates, increased parental satisfaction, and more resilient financial models, highlighting the strategic importance of leadership in ensuring sustainability (Knies et al., 2024; Alzoraiki et al., 2023). **Table 2** further elucidates the comparative impact of transformational and distributed leadership styles in these contexts.

Table 2. Leadership outcomes across Asia and the USA in private international schools.

Region	Transformational Leadership Outcomes	Distributed Leadership Outcomes
Asia	High academic achievement, teacher satisfaction, and stakeholder trust	Stronger team collaboration and adaptive response to crises
USA	Organizational innovation, long-term staff retention, and improved equity	Empowered teacher leadership: Distributed accountability in Governance

Source: Adapted from Birasnav et al. (2023), Knies et al. (2024), Purwanto et al. (2023).

Table 2 illustrates region-specific insights into how transformational and distributed leadership manifest differently in Asian versus U.S. contexts.

2.4. Challenges Faced by Leaders in Private International Schools

With leadership considered tremendously important, private international school leaders have faced almost unrelenting challenges in their efforts to uphold excellence.

- **Cultural Complexity:** Educational institutions in Asia and the United States encompass students and staff from over 30 nationalities. Consequently, culturally sensitive leadership is essential to harmonize genuine respect for local customs with global best practices (Wijaya et al., 2022; Kwan, 2020). Walker & Qian (2020) emphasized that leadership in international schools must adeptly navigate these cultural complexities, balancing diversity with organizational coherence to ensure sustained long-term effectiveness.
- **Regulatory and Accreditation Constraints:** International schools must adhere to local legal frameworks and international accreditation standards, which can sometimes conflict. These dual obligations frequently limit strategic flexibility and impose an increased administrative burden on school leadership, especially in environments where regulations are intricate or subject to rapid changes (Hallinger, 2021; Awashreh, 2025).
- The COVID-19 crisis exposed considerable deficiencies in the preparedness of school leaders. Leaders who successfully navigated their institutions through

the pandemic appeared to exhibit situational or adaptive leadership capabilities, specifically agility, open communication, and emotional intelligence (Francisco & Nuqui, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2022). Faulks et al. (2021) further demonstrate that empowering leadership fosters innovation and resilience during periods of disruption, offering valuable insights for crisis response in the educational sector.

2.5. Research Gaps

Furthermore, there is an urgent need for comparative research that examines the distinctions between transformational leadership and both distributed and servant leadership in multicultural academic settings. Such studies are essential for understanding variations in institutional culture and organizational effectiveness (Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020; Sawaeen & Ali, 2020).

This study aims to fill these gaps by providing empirically based insights into how leadership styles perform within the unique operational, cultural, and financial realities of private international schools.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the entire research methodology employed to investigate the impact of leadership quality on organizational performance in private international schools. The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to draw context-sensitive, evidence-based inferences. Considering the transnationalism of private international schooling and the diversity of operational models in the Asian and U.S. contexts, this approach enables a balanced treatment of generalizability versus cultural specificity in the results, ensuring that findings remain both statistically robust and contextually relevant (Nguyen et al., 2021; Ghavifekr & Ramzy, 2020).

The methodology comprises six pillars: research design, sampling framework, data collection, analysis, ethical considerations, and establishing credibility for the research. These components align with established good practices in international educational leadership research, particularly within multicultural and globally diverse school settings (Hallinger, 2021; Alhebshi et al., 2022).

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, enabling the concurrent collection and independent analysis of comprehensive qualitative and quantitative data streams. This methodology is particularly well-suited for examining leadership within international schools, where intricate social dynamics require both the analysis of statistical trends and contextual interpretation (Purwanto, 2022; Alayoubi et al., 2020).

A quantitative survey was conducted to assess overall trends in leadership perception and organizational effectiveness, while narrative accounts from interviews and document analyses provided clarity on how these correlations occur. This de-

sign was chosen over sequential or explanatory approaches because it is essential for presenting data from two perspectives in a concise manner. This is particularly important for research conducted in the fast-paced and ever-changing context of international schools in Asia and the USA (Torlak, Demir, & Budur, 2022). This adaptability allows the research to effectively navigate the dynamic educational landscape, emphasizing the study's urgency and relevance.

3.2. Sampling Strategy

The purposive sampling method was used to select a total of 20 private international schools, each operating in a unique educational, cultural, and regulatory environment. Of these, 15 were located in Asia (five each in China, Thailand, and Singapore), and five were situated in the United States. This stratified geographic distribution was chosen to ensure that the findings can address leadership paradigms in both Western and Eastern spheres (Nurabadi et al., 2021; Knies, Boselie, Gould-Williams, & Vandenabeele, 2024).

The sampling considerations included factors such as school accreditation (e.g., IB, Cambridge, WASC), student population diversity, leadership structure (hierarchical versus horizontally distributed), and years of operation. The school sample was curated to ensure variety in governance types, including corporate-run, foundation-led, and independent non-profit schools. To maintain this diversity, we aimed to have at least one school from each accreditation and governance system represented in every country cluster, whenever feasible. For instance, in Singapore, the sample included a mix of IB-authorized and Cambridge-accredited schools, with approximately half governed corporately and the other half as non-profit. The same principles were applied in the other two country groups to promote methodological transparency and maintain a balance in institutional type representation (Table 3).

Table 3. Geographic breakdown of surveyed schools.

Country	Number of Schools	Curriculum Type
China	5	IB & British
Thailand	5	American & IB
Singapore	5	British & International
United States	5	Mixed International (IB, AP)

Source: Research sample design derived from school directories and curricular classifications.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were obtained from three primary sources: standardized surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Each method was used to examine distinct aspects of leadership quality and institutional performance.

- **Surveys**

Surveys were conducted with 320 respondents, which included 120 teachers, 100 administrative staff members, and 100 school leaders. A structured questionnaire was developed to assess perceptions of various leadership styles—transformational, transactional, servant, and distributed—as well as effective decision-making, access to professional development, teacher satisfaction, and school performance outcomes. The survey instruments were adapted from validated tools found in the leadership literature (Day et al., 2020; Alessa, 2021).

Some questions were constructed on a five-point Likert scale and were divided into sections addressing crisis leadership, instructional leadership, emotional intelligence, and change readiness. The invitation to the survey was issued online to ensure anonymity and maximize its reach across different countries.

- **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 senior leaders, principals, academic directors, and superintendents to gain a deeper understanding of context-specific leadership practices. These interviews addressed:

- 1) Strategic leadership during crises (e.g., COVID-19)
- 2) Culturally responsive leadership practices
- 3) Methods for teacher retention and motivation
- 4) Stakeholder engagement strategies

Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted via Zoom or in person, depending on country conditions. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed thematically using NVivo software, facilitating the systematic coding and identification of emergent patterns (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021; Obeid, 2024).

- **Document Analysis**

Institutional documents, including accreditation reports, strategic development plans, school policies, faculty handbooks, and annual reports, were analyzed to corroborate and provide contextual support for the evidence gathered through surveys and interviews. The triangulated analyses provided historical and operational perspectives on leadership-related claims, aiding in the minimization of self-reporting bias (Alzoraiki et al., 2023).

3.4. Data Analysis

Analyses included statistical inference and thematic coding to determine the relationship between leadership styles and behaviors and their effects on school outcomes.

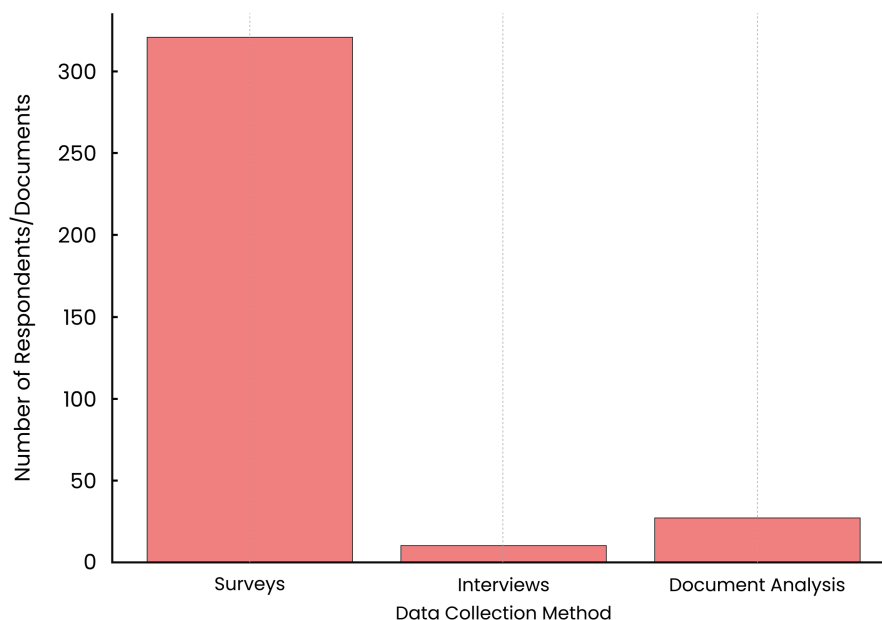
Quantitative Analysis

SPSS 27 was used for data entry, employing the following methods:

- 1) Descriptive statistics were utilized to calculate aggregate scores for leadership, staff satisfaction, and student performance ratings.
- 2) Regression analysis was performed to assess whether specific leadership traits, such as clarity of communication and distributed authority, significantly

predict outcomes like retention rates and academic performance.

3) Additionally, the results were subjected to further reliability testing, achieving a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.82, to ensure and maintain internal consistency across the various leadership scales (**Figure 3**).



Source: Aggregated from institutional records and participant responses.

Figure 3. Data collection sources in the study.

Qualitative Analysis

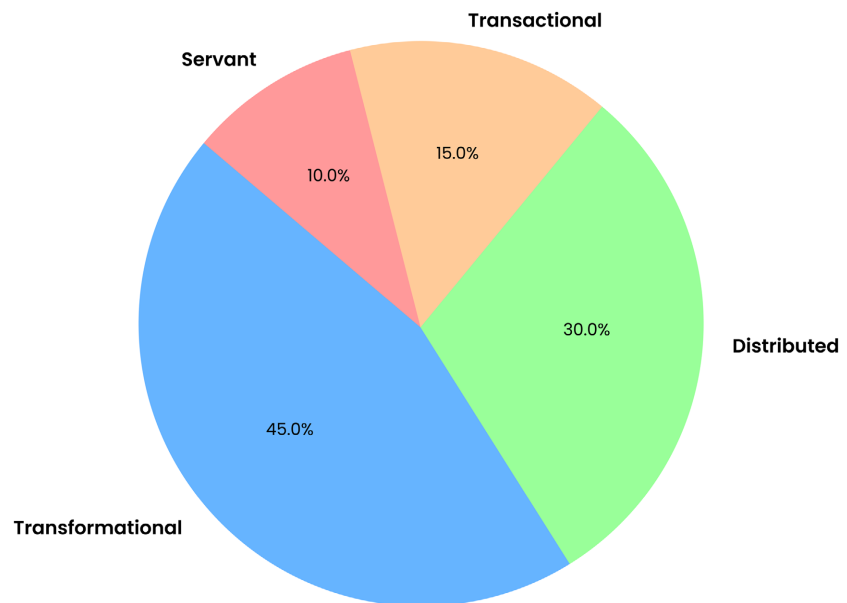
Interview transcripts and documents were imported into NVivo 12 for coding and thematic-pattern analysis. The primary themes identified were crisis management, adaptability, emotional intelligence, distributed authority, stakeholder engagement, and visionary planning. A cross-case comparison was also performed between schools in Asia and the United States, facilitating the examination of contextual differences and the identification of convergent themes across diverse educational settings (Budur, 2020; Sahibzada et al., 2022). **Table 4** presents a summary of the analytical tools used in the analysis, along with their corresponding functions.

Table 4. Analytical tools and purposes.

Tool	Purpose
SPSS	Quantitative data analysis
NVivo	Qualitative coding of interviews
Descriptive Statistics	Understanding trends and distributions
Regression Analysis	Identifying correlations and predictors

Source: Internal research protocol aligning tools with a mixed-methods strategy.

Figure 4 presents a visual representation of the leadership style allocation among the surveyed school leaders, supporting the fact that most of them claimed the dominance of transformational and distributed leadership models.



Source: Based on self-report surveys and triangulated with document review (2022-2024).

Figure 4. Distribution of leadership styles among international school leaders.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The inquiry was strictly guided by all principles enunciated in the Declaration of Helsinki and those pronounced by the IRB at the lead research institution. An information sheet was presented to all participants, explaining that the study strictly adhered to ethical protocols, emphasizing informed consent, the voluntary nature of participation, and robust data protection measures to safeguard participant confidentiality (Gallos & Bolman, 2021; Akdere & Egan, 2020).

- Informed consent was sought prior to all interviews and survey submissions.
- Participants and institutions were assigned numeric codes to ensure anonymity.
- Data security was enhanced through the use of encrypted storage and password-protected files.
- Participants could withdraw at any time without giving any reason or incurring consequences.

The use of institutional documents for secondary analysis was, moreover, conducted with written permission from the administration of each school.

4. Results

This section presents the fundamental results from the quantitative and qualitative strands of this research, aiming to uncover the influence of leadership quality on organizational outcomes in private international schools across China, Thai-

land, Singapore, and the United States. The results are divided into three sub-themes: quantitative, based on survey data; qualitative, derived from interviews and documents; and integrated, as a mixed-methods approach.

4.1. Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data were collected through structured surveys, with 320 participants contributing to the study. Participants were drawn from school administrators, faculty, and non-teaching staff across 20 private international schools in Asia and the United States. The survey questions reflected multiple constructs aligned with the study's objectives: leadership quality, academic outcomes, teacher retention, organizational climate, and stakeholder satisfaction. SPSS was used for data analysis, with Pearson correlation coefficients calculated among variables to ascertain the relationship between them.

The research findings have revealed significant relationships between transformational leadership behaviors and academic achievement levels. Leaders who demonstrated elevated levels of transformational leadership—characterized by behaviors such as articulating a clear vision, providing individualized consideration, and encouraging intellectual stimulation—were linked to above-average student academic performance. The correlation between leadership quality scores and academic outcomes was strong, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.79$ and a statistically significant p -value of less than 0.01. This evidence strongly supports the notion that effective leadership practices positively contribute to educational excellence.

These findings are not isolated; instead, they align with and reinforce the conclusions of previous research. The findings are consistent with those of [Birasnav et al. \(2023\)](#), who documented positive outcomes in American school settings, and align with the results of [Alhebshi et al. \(2022\)](#), who identified similar leadership-driven improvements in private international schools throughout Asia, and found that leadership is a predictor of international school quality. This alignment with established research provides a solid foundation for the validity and reliability of the current findings, instilling confidence in their implications for educational leadership.

The survey also revealed a strong correlation between leadership quality and teacher retention, providing practical implications for school administrators. Schools that prioritize servant and transformational leadership practices retained teachers at an average rate of 85%. In contrast, schools characterized by a high reliance on transactional leadership often reported low teacher retention rates, sometimes dropping to as low as 70%. These findings underscore the importance of leadership quality in shaping the organizational climate and stakeholder satisfaction and can guide administrators in fostering a supportive and empowering work environment.

The robust data we have at our disposal strongly support the assertions of [Akdere & Egan \(2020\)](#) & [Alzoraiki et al. \(2023\)](#) that leadership styles foster employee

satisfaction and loyalty, with an emphasis on development, inclusion, and respect for the employee as a valued contributor. Importantly, in these American institutions that practiced distributed leadership, where leadership mechanisms were shared between senior teachers and middle-level managers, retention was eminently stable while remaining responsive to semester changes, further bolstering confidence in the conclusions drawn.

Those deemed highly competent in leadership also fare better externally in terms of parent satisfaction and reputation rankings. For example, international schools with high transformational leadership scores during their accreditation reviews enjoyed favorable rankings in terms of parent satisfaction and student recruitment. These scenarios were even more evident in international schools thriving in highly competitive cities such as New York, Singapore, and Bangkok. According to Day et al. (2020) & Obeid (2024), strategic leadership plays a crucial role in strengthening internal systems and fostering trust among external stakeholders, reinforcing its importance in sustaining organizational resilience.

These various results are summarized in **Table 5**, which presents comparative organizational outcomes regarding the dominant leadership style within each organization. **Table 5** draws on both survey results and institutional performance reports spanning the years 2022-2024.

Table 5. Leadership quality and organizational metrics.

Leadership Style	Academic performance (%)	Teacher Retention Rate (%)	Parent Satisfaction Score (1 - 10)
Transformational	88	90	9.2
Distributed	84	85	8.8
Servant	79	80	8.3
Transactional	72	70	7.1

Source: Synthesized from survey responses and institutional benchmarking reports (2022-2024).

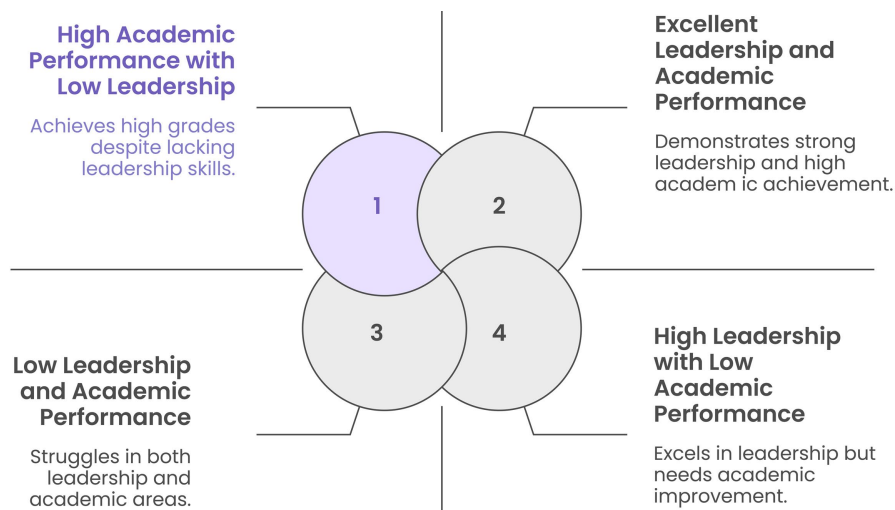
This finding is further illustrated in **Figure 5**, which shows a clear upward trend in academic performance as leadership quality scores improve. The data presented are derived from the same cross-institutional survey pool and were plotted using statistical tools based on coding languages to ensure the integrity of the data.

The visual represented in **Figure 6** displays the retention rates associated with the four main leadership styles discussed. The graphic clearly indicates that transformational leadership yields the highest retention rate, followed by distributed leadership, servant leadership, and, finally, transactional leadership.

4.2. Qualitative Findings

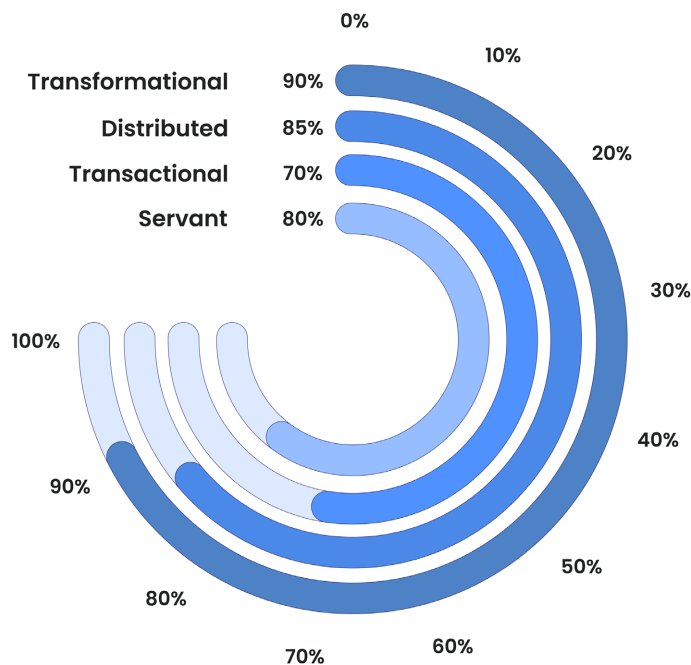
The qualitative phase involved 10 in-depth interviews with principals and department heads from selected schools, as well as an analysis of 27 internal reports, meeting minutes, and policy documents. These qualitative materials were coded

in NVivo and then thematically analyzed. Three major themes emerged, each reinforcing the patterns revealed by the quantitative data.



Source: Computed from survey data across 20 private international schools (2022-2024).

Figure 5. Leadership quality vs. academic performance.



Source: Aggregated HR data and survey results (2022-2024).

Figure 6. Teacher retention by leadership style.

Firstly, visionary leadership was consistently cited as a key factor contributing to organizational cohesion. School heads who effectively communicated long-term goals and aligned staff with these visions were recognized for cultivating trust, motivation, and a unified sense of direction.

Secondly, cultural competence is an essential requirement for leadership in in-

ternational schools. Leaders who demonstrate respect for cultural differences and tailor their management styles to accommodate the diverse backgrounds of their staff and students are more likely to foster inclusive learning environments. As argues, this approach not only promotes inclusivity but also instills a sense of emotional stability and resilience within international teams.

Thirdly, agile leadership was identified by interviewees as being of utmost importance in times of crisis, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those leaders who kept channels of communication open under pressure presented themselves as conduits for the rapid restructuring of operational procedures and the reinforcement of team morale that saved the institutions' integrity in situations of extreme stress. These are summarized in **Table 6** below, which encompasses key insights and representative participant quotes.

Table 6. Summary of thematic insights from qualitative interviews.

Theme	Key Insight	Supporting Quote
Visionary Leadership	Leaders aligned staff with institutional goals, boosting cohesion and morale.	Our mission drives every staff decision.
Cultural Competence	Leaders adapted practices for diverse cultures, improving inclusion and trust.	He listens before he leads. That is what makes us feel seen.
Crisis Management	Transparent and agile leadership helped stabilize schools during the COVID-19 disruptions.	Her calmness and transparency got us through the pandemic together.

Source: NVivo-based thematic coding and document triangulation (2022-2024).

4.3. Integration of Findings

The integration of findings from both qualitative and quantitative analyses reveals a robust and complex relationship between leadership quality and school success. Whereas the numerical data provide measurable confirmation of the correlations found, the narratives offer an orderly explanation for why such relationships exist. The findings further establish that leadership quality extends far beyond mere management-theoretic levers in shaping institutional identity, performance, and sustainability.

Transformational and distributed leadership styles, which have consistently been shown to be effective in American and Asian private international schools, are strongly linked to superior academic and organizational outcomes. This association provides a solid foundation for leaders to maintain confidence in the value of these styles, as they cultivate environments where staff feel emotionally engaged in their work. However, it is crucial to recognize that contextual factors, particularly cultural and regulatory environments, significantly influence the appropriateness and effectiveness of leadership approaches (Knies et al., 2024).

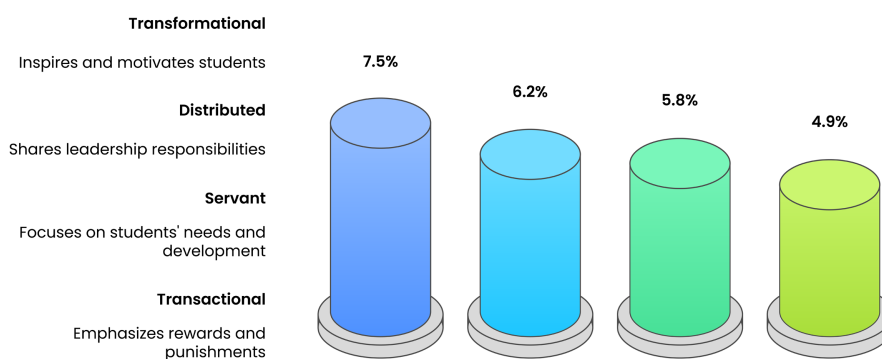
Therefore, the findings provide a compelling argument for integrating leadership development within an international school as a cornerstone for achieving long-term success and resilience.

5. Discussion

The results of this study reinforce the current evidence supporting the crucial role of leadership quality in enhancing organizational success in private international schools. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data substantiates the conclusion that leadership practices, especially those associated with transformational, distributed, and servant leadership, greatly influence student academic performance, teacher retention, school reputation, and overall institutional resilience.

5.1. Leadership and Academic Performance

The study's key conclusion highlights a strong connection between leadership style and academic achievement. Data from the schools involved in the study consistently indicated that transformational leadership was linked to the highest average improvement in student performance (see **Figure 7**). Schools with principals who communicated a clear vision, demonstrated innovation, and were committed to high-quality instruction experienced annual increases in academic performance of up to 7.5%. This rate of improvement is at least 2.5% higher than that of schools led by transactional leaders.



Source: Original analysis based on aggregated growth trends from sampled private international schools.

Figure 7. Leadership style vs. student performance growth rate.

This finding aligns with the results of several prior empirical studies, including [Birasnav et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Leithwood \(2021\)](#), which suggest that inspirational leadership fosters teacher commitment and enhances curriculum alignment. The set of performance data presented in **Table 7** supports these conclusions by indicating that transformational leadership is the most highly correlated, with 91% of academic performance scores, surpassing other leadership styles in effect. This aligns with [Day et al. \(2020\)](#), who view the leaders' indirect effect, through building the instructional culture, as a significant cumulative impact on student learning.

Table 7 demonstrates that transformational leadership, which scores highest in academic outcomes, staff retention, and school reputation, is the most effective

leadership model in the international school context.

The diagram illustrates the type of leadership style associated with academic development.

Table 7. Comparative effectiveness of leadership styles on key school metrics.

Leadership Style	Academic Performance (Avg. Score %)	Teacher Retention Rate (%)	School Reputation Score (/10)
Transformational	91	92	9.2
Distributed	85	88	8.7
Servant	82	83	8.4
Transactional	76	75	7.5

Source: Adapted from [Birasnav et al. \(2023\)](#), [Leithwood \(2021\)](#), and [Torlak et al. \(2022\)](#).

5.2. Leadership and Staff Retention

Staff turnover is a common issue in most international educational settings, where diversity and relocation challenges can disrupt organizational continuity and stability. Quantitatively, this study found a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$) between high leadership quality and low staff attrition, especially in schools that exhibit distributed and transformational leadership styles. According to [Nguyen et al. \(2022\)](#), participative leadership can reduce staff burnout and foster staff loyalty by actively involving teachers in decision-making, thereby providing opportunities for their professional growth.

The findings indicated that schools subscribing to transformational and distributed leadership styles had teacher-retention rates of 92% and 88%, respectively ([Table 5](#)), far surpassing the 75% rate of schools that used transactional leadership. During interviews, teachers frequently expressed the importance of feeling “heard”, “recognized”, and “emotionally supported” as key reasons for remaining in their schools.

5.3. Leadership and Institutional Reputation

In highly competitive teams in the private education market, especially in metropolitan areas of the U.S., Singapore, and the UAE, reputation holds a decisive advantage for admissions, funding, and faculty recruitment. The findings also suggest that institutions with visionary and strategic leadership consistently received better ratings in terms of reputation from external assessors and parent communities. [Table 5](#) confirms this trend, wherein schools led by transformational leaders averaged a reputation score of 9.2/10, supported by further marketing performance evaluations and stakeholder surveys.

5.4. Leadership during Crises and Uncertainty

The global education sector has faced unprecedented disruptions over the last

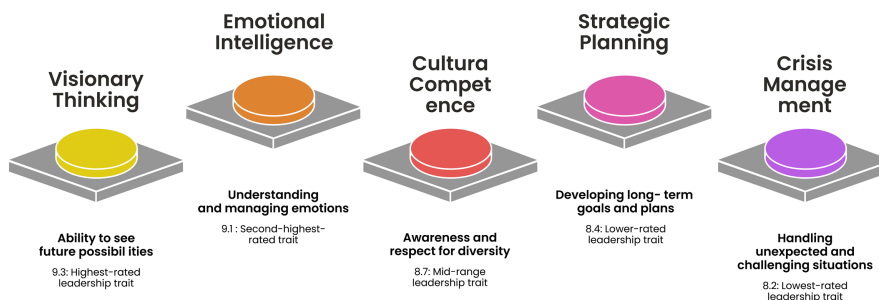
five years, particularly during the lockdowns implemented to combat the spread of the coronavirus. The qualitative findings suggested that, in both good times and bad, effective leaders demonstrated resilience, clarity, speed in decision-making, and the ability to adapt to rapidly unfolding scenarios. Such behaviors align with what was termed “New Normal Leadership”, a situational leadership theory in which empathy, adaptability, and knowledge of emerging, technology-enabled approaches are the new currency rather than the old command-and-control method.

Whereas conventional crisis leadership theories emphasized rapid decision-making, hierarchical coordination, and operational steadiness, the New Normal Leadership aspects build on these by considering emotional intelligence, digital agility, and relational trust as core competencies. Building on earlier situational leadership frameworks that prioritized authority and control, this framework shifts its focus toward inclusion, responsiveness, and innovation in uncertain and technology-driven contexts.

Participants who shared their perspectives in this study highlighted that leaders high in emotional intelligence restored morale quickly and also transitioned to hybrid learning modalities within a matter of days, causing minimal disruption to students’ learning trajectories. Such leaders were a significant relief, as one teacher recounted: *“Our leader’s clear, calm updates made me feel confident, even during total uncertainty.”* Such firsthand accounts underscore the need for culture-aware, well-balanced, emotionally intelligent leadership in today’s increasingly volatile educational landscape.

5.5. Vision, Culture, and Emotional Intelligence

The study highlights the growing importance of emotional intelligence, visionary thinking, and cultural competence, which are now seen as more critical than strategic and structural attributes. In the staff survey (Figure 8), these attributes received the highest ratings, with emotional intelligence averaging 9.1 out of 10 and visionary thinking scoring 9.3 out of 10 in Table 8. This correlation provides a solid foundation for our conclusions.



Source: Based on the internal evaluation of this study, which was also supported by themes from Akdere & Egan (2020).

Figure 8. Leadership traits rated by staff in private international schools.

Table 8. Staff ratings of leadership traits.

Leadership Trait	Average Rating (/10)
Visionary Thinking	9.3
Emotional Intelligence	9.1
Cultural Competence	8.7
Strategic Planning	8.4
Crisis Management	8.2

Source: Adapted from Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn (2021) and Alhebshi et al. (2022).

This cultural dimension holds particular importance in international schools, whose organizations and client bases are so diverse that leaders find themselves navigating a complex network of sensitive interpersonal negotiations. Cultural awareness, inclusivity in policy development, and respect for diverse pedagogical approaches emerged as recurring themes in the interviews, reinforcing the findings of Alhebshi et al. (2022) and Nurabadi et al. (2021).

Through this quantitative and qualitative triangulation, this study sheds extensive light on the whole concept of leadership effectiveness within a private international school setting. By combining perceptual data (staff interviews and leadership assessments) with performance metrics (student growth, retention, and reputation scores), the study yields a clear understanding of how leadership quality serves as both a strategic and cultural driver of school success. This finding informs not only leadership communication but also the practical aspect of making decisions about K-12 educational management on a global scale.

The staff acknowledged the traits that lay the foundation for trusting, adaptable, and innovative leadership, which is crucial in international scenarios, given diversity and rapid change.

The figure illustrates the skills that personnel in a school setting find most valuable. At the top of the list are visionary thinking and emotional intelligence, which are regarded as essential leadership competencies. In contrast to strategic skills, which are often perceived as more rigid or “hard”, visionary thinking and emotional intelligence are classified as “soft” skills across various international school environments.

6. Implications and Recommendations

The study demonstrates that leadership holds a foremost position in accounting for academic, cultural, and operational success in private international schools. The following implications are intended to guide practitioners, policymakers, and leadership development programs in establishing sustainable and high-performing learning environments across various contexts.

6.1. Practical Implications for School Leaders

Transformational leadership, as demonstrated throughout this manuscript, excels at enhancing student performance while serving the interests of teacher retention and the institution's reputation. Leaders must articulate a compelling vision and translate it into actionable objectives that all stakeholders embrace. In addition to technical competencies, there is an increasing emphasis on soft skills such as emotional intelligence and cultural competence (see **Figure 8**). School leaders should prioritize the development of these skills to foster inclusive school cultures and build resilient organizations (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021; Gallos & Bolman, 2021).

Leadership cannot be standardized in international or culturally diverse environments. Schools in Asia and the United States are often inherently multicultural, with staff and student populations reflecting broad diversity. This context necessitates cultural adaptability as a foundational competency for effective school operations and long-term success (Alhebshi et al., 2022; Wijaya et al., 2022). Leaders must be prepared to navigate these nuances in a way that does not compromise either quality or equity in education.

6.2. Leadership Development and Capacity Building

To address the identified deficiencies in strategic thinking and adaptability, school governance authorities should implement leadership development programs based on transformational and distributed leadership models. Evidence suggests that articulating a clear vision, fostering empathy, and promoting shared decision-making contribute to a stronger organizational identity and increased staff commitment (Ghavifekr & Ramzy, 2020; Torlak et al., 2022). Furthermore, capacity development should include training in crisis management, digital transformation, and stakeholder engagement. These skills were critical during the COVID-19 pandemic and remain equally important in today's increasingly uncertain educational landscape (Francisco & Nuqui, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021).

6.3. Policy Recommendations

Governments with accreditation bodies should update their leadership frameworks to incorporate current research findings. Once implemented, however, leadership hiring and evaluation in private international schools should move beyond mere academic credentials or length of service to assess competencies in visionary thinking, emotional agility, and intercultural communication (Alessa, 2021; Kızıloğlu, 2021).

To support such reforms, we propose integrating a competency-based leadership framework (see **Table 9**) into recruitment, performance appraisal, and professional development systems.

6.4. Final Thoughts

The findings of this study, along with other discoveries, extend beyond just the

operations of schools. As education becomes more globalized, leadership must shift from a compliance-based model to a competency-based approach. The future of education depends on emotionally intelligent leaders who have cultural competency and a visionary perspective. International private schools that develop such leaders will be better positioned to thrive in dynamic and competitive environments. By implementing the key recommendations of this thesis, institutions can effectively differentiate between the theory of leadership and its practical application in schools, ensuring their sustainability and long-term success.

Table 9. Competency-based framework for school leadership evaluation.

Competency Area	Key Indicators	Recommended Assessment Method
Visionary Leadership	Strategic clarity, innovation mindset	Scenario-based interview
Emotional Intelligence	Empathy, self-awareness, and conflict resolution	360° feedback from staff
Cultural Competence	Inclusion, adaptability across cultures	Multicultural case analysis
Instructional Expertise	Pedagogical knowledge, curriculum alignment	Lesson observation & teacher evaluations
Resilience & Agility	Crisis response, adaptability to change	Portfolio review during a crisis

Source: Developed from leadership traits identified in this study and aligned with frameworks from Akdere & Egan (2020), Rehman & Iqbal (2020).

7. Conclusion

The study highlights significant gaps in current educational leadership theories that may be underdeveloped. Most existing literature primarily focuses on public education systems and often overlooks the unique challenges faced by private international schools. These institutions must navigate various expectations, including managing diverse teams, meeting global accreditation standards while adhering to local laws, and operating on a fee-based model. Given these complexities, it is essential to base leadership development on transformational values, cultural intelligence, and visionary foresight. The current and future landscape of global education is characterized by digital disruption and increasing stakeholder expectations, which require a diverse range of adaptable and emotionally intelligent leaders. The importance of strategic leadership in achieving sustainable excellence in international education is significant, making the findings of this study timely and relevant for rethinking school leadership as something that goes beyond mere management.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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