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A Meta-Synthetic Analysis on School Headship in Tanzania: Translating Leadership Ideals into Practice within School Realities

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Abstract

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In this study, empirical research on Tanzanian school headship is synthesised to examine leadership orientations, structural constraints, and the gaps between policy ideals and practice. The review draws on 32 empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, theses, and reviews) conducted in Tanzania between 2022 and 2025, focusing on school heads in primary and secondary schools across multiple regions, including Lindi, Dodoma, Morogoro, Kagera, Shinyanga, Arusha, Geita, Mbeya, Mwanza and Dar es Salaam. Data sources included Google Scholar, ERIC, African Journals Online (AJOL), ResearchGate, and Institutional Repositories of Tanzanian Universities. A qualitative meta-synthesis approach was employed to integrate findings through thematic coding and line-of-argument synthesis. Findings indicate that heads predominantly adopt transformational, instructional, ethical, and distributed approaches, yet their effectiveness is mediated by resource scarcity, centralised governance, socio-cultural norms, and professional preparedness. Persistent gaps between policy aspirations and enactment, particularly regarding gender equity, decentralisation, ethical standards, and instructional

supervision, underscore the limitations of normative frameworks in guiding practice. The study contributes a context-sensitive, evidence-based understanding of school headship, emphasising the need for multi-dimensional, theory-informed interventions that address structural, cultural, and institutional enablers of effective leadership.

Keywords: *school headship, educational leadership, Tanzania, meta-synthesis, gender equity.*

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Introduction

School headship constitutes the primary institutional expression of educational leadership in Tanzania, where formal authority for school governance, instructional supervision, and policy implementation is vested in appointed heads of schools. Tanzanian school heads are expected to function simultaneously as pedagogical leaders, administrative managers, community mobilisers, and agents of state policy, often within contexts marked by resource scarcity, centralised governance, and socio-political complexity (Bush & Oduro, 2006; Galabawa et al., 2018). Despite these demanding and frequently contradictory expectations, leadership research and policy discourse have tended to rely on idealised or heroic representations of school headship, portraying school heads as transformational figures capable of overcoming systemic constraints through individual vision, commitment, and authority.

Empirical research, however, presents a far more complex and contested picture. Although democratic, transformational, and instructional leadership models are widely endorsed in policy documents and scholarly literature, their enactment in Tanzanian schools is uneven, partial, and strongly mediated by structural, institutional, and cultural conditions (Manaseh et al., 2023; Ferdinandi & Kiwonde, 2023). Leadership practices appear to be shaped less by

individual disposition than by historical legacies, governance arrangements, professional cultures, and material conditions. Yet much of this evidence remains fragmented across regions, methodologies, and analytical traditions, limiting its cumulative theoretical contribution and obscuring broader national patterns of leadership enactment.

Historically, school headship in Tanzania has evolved through colonial administration, post-independence nation-building, mass education expansion, and recent accountability-oriented reforms. Colonial schools emphasised hierarchy, discipline, and control rather than instructional development (United Nations, 1957; Samoff, 1990). Post-independence nationalisation framed schools as instruments of equity and social transformation, but rapid expansion under Universal Primary Education (UPE) strained resources and normalised administrative survival and procedural compliance (Galabawa, 2001; Wedgwood, 2007). Decentralisation under Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) and Secondary Education Development Plan (SEDP), alongside initiatives like fee-free education and Secondary Education Quality Improvement Programme (SEQUIP), intensified leadership demands, yet professional preparation and support lagged (URT, 2001; URT, 2023; Bush & Glover, 2023). Leadership appointments remain tenure-based rather than competence-driven, and public discourse often confuses strict leadership, especially in private schools, with effectiveness, overlooking structural disparities in resources, class size, and socio-economic context. This misattribution risks reinforcing deficit views of public-school heads and obscures the need for context-sensitive analyses of leadership practice.

The study distinguishes between educational leadership, school leadership, and school headship, concepts often collapsed in policy and research. Educational leadership encompasses system-wide and theoretical perspectives, spanning policy, governance, and institutional levels. School leadership refers to leadership enacted within schools as a

relational and sometimes distributed practice involving multiple actors (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2013). School headship, the primary focus here, is exercised by formally appointed heads with statutory authority, making them pivotal mediators between policy, administration, and classroom practice. In Tanzania, headship sits at the intersection of these levels, translating leadership ideals into operational realities and shaping how systemic goals are enacted within schools (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Bush & Glover, 2023).

Educational leadership theories, particularly transformational, instructional, moral, democratic, and distributed leadership, provide the interpretive lenses for this analysis. These frameworks are treated not as descriptions of fully realised practice but as analytical resources for examining how leadership orientations are selectively enacted, constrained, hybridised, or distorted within specific institutional contexts (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Lumby & Foskett, 2016). Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises leadership as hybrid, negotiated, and context-bound rather than as a stable set of traits or behaviours (Gronn, 2009). Unlike generic contextual or situated leadership models, which treat context as an external moderating variable, this study conceptualises Tanzanian school headship as a hybrid institutional practice in which leadership is structurally produced through the interaction of formal policy logics, bureaucratic controls, and local survival strategies. From this perspective, leadership is not a fixed list of competencies but an emergent configuration shaped by institutional pressures, cultural norms, and material conditions.

Empirical research globally and across sub-Saharan Africa affirms the normative appeal of transformational and democratic leadership, linking these approaches to teacher motivation, organisational commitment, and positive school climate (Leithwood et al., 2020; Day et al., 2016). At the same time, persistent gaps between leadership ideals and practice are documented, especially in centralised and resource-constrained systems where leadership remains individualised,

compliance-oriented, and administratively overloaded (Pont et al., 2008; Bush & Oduro, 2006). Studies in market-oriented and crisis contexts further show how performance pressures and emergencies legitimise more directive or authoritarian leadership forms (Ball, 2012; Harris & Jones, 2020).

Tanzanian research mirrors these patterns. Teachers favour collaborative and supportive leadership and transformational practices are associated with job satisfaction and perceived effectiveness (Kayombo et al., 2025; Mwita, 2023). However, instructional leadership is often enacted bureaucratically, distributed leadership remains weakly institutionalised due to hierarchical cultures and limited delegation (Chiwamba et al., 2022; Komba, 2025), and women remain underrepresented in headship despite evidence of effective collaborative and instructional leadership, pointing to structural rather than competence-based barriers (Nobeye, 2022).

Despite the growing volume of empirical research on school headship in Tanzania, the literature remains fragmented, methodologically dispersed, and analytically uneven. Many studies focus narrowly on leadership styles without systematically examining how historical legacies, governance structures, market dynamics, and accountability pressures shape leadership enactment. Few studies integrate findings across regions and methodologies to generate a coherent national-level understanding of school headship. Moreover, heroic and individualised leadership narratives continue to dominate policy discourse, often unchallenged by synthesis-based evidence that foregrounds structural constraints, institutional mediation, and collective practice.

To address these gaps, this study conducts a qualitative meta-synthesis of empirical research on school headship in Tanzania published between 2022 and 2025. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify the dominant leadership orientations adopted by school heads in Tanzanian schools;
2. Examine the structural, institutional, and cultural constraints shaping school headship practice; and

3. Explore recurring gaps between policy ideals and leadership enactment on the ground.

Methodology

A qualitative meta-synthesis was employed to examine empirical research on Tanzanian school headship. The unit of analysis comprised formally appointed heads at primary and secondary levels, with educational leadership theories providing a lens to understand how leadership practices are enacted, constrained, and shaped by context. A qualitative meta-synthesis was appropriate given the fragmented, context-specific nature of school headship research in Tanzania, often reported through case studies, regional surveys, and postgraduate theses. Unlike statistical meta-analysis, this approach emphasises conceptual integration across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies to generate higher-order insights (Noblit & Hare, 1988). While meta-ethnography originated for qualitative studies, contemporary meta-synthesis increasingly incorporates quantitative and mixed-methods findings when the goal is conceptual rather than statistical integration (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Hoon, 2013). In this study, quantitative results were translated into conceptual claims, such as leadership orientations, constraints, and institutional dynamics, and synthesised alongside qualitative themes. The focus of synthesis was on analytical claims about leadership practice and enactment, rather than on methodological design.

A systematic literature search was conducted using Google Scholar, ERIC, African Journals Online (AJOL), and ResearchGate, supplemented by manual searches of institutional repositories at several higher learning institutions. Postgraduate theses and dissertations were deliberately included, as they constitute a substantial portion of Tanzanian school leadership research, often underrepresented in international databases.

Search terms combined keywords such as *school headship*, *educational leadership*, *instructional leadership*, *transformational leadership*, *women school leaders*, and *school governance* with “Tanzania.” Contextual terms, including *decentralisation*, *instructional supervision*, *teacher motivation*, and

participatory leadership were also employed. Reference lists of key studies were screened to identify additional sources.

Inclusion criteria encompassed empirical studies on school heads or school-level leadership in Tanzania, published between 2022 and 2025, available as peer-reviewed articles, theses, dissertations, or commissioned reports. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on higher education, lacked empirical data, addressed leadership vaguely, or were not Tanzania-specific. Included studies were screened for methodological adequacy, including clarity of research questions, transparency of data collection, coherence between methods and conclusions, and relevance to school headship. Themes were generally included only if supported by at least three independent studies, following standard qualitative synthesis practice (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Hoon, 2013). Minor exceptions were made for critical but less frequently reported issues, such as unethical leadership and decentralisation challenges, due to their contextual significance. Table 1 summarises the search and selection process.

Table 1: Flow Summary of Literature Search and Inclusion

Stage	Number of Records
Records identified through database/repository search	112
Duplicates removed	27
Records screened (titles/abstracts)	85
Records excluded at screening	34
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	51
Full-text articles excluded	19
Studies included in final meta-synthesis	32

The final sample comprised 32 studies: 10 qualitative articles, 2 quantitative articles, 7 mixed-methods articles, 8 dissertations, 1 thesis, 2 literature reviews, and 2 systematic reviews. The review studies were included solely for thematic convergence and

triangulation, not as primary evidence, and helped assess the stability of inductively derived themes across the broader literature. These studies spanned primary and secondary schools in both rural and urban contexts across Lindi, Dodoma, Morogoro, Kagera, Shinyanga, Arusha, Geita, Mbeya, Mwanza, and Dar es Salaam, with this regional and methodological diversity enhancing both contextual breadth and analytical robustness. While the synthesis spans multiple regions and school types, the distribution of studies remains uneven, with greater representation from certain zones. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as analytically generalizable patterns rather than statistically representative national estimates. The synthesis identifies recurring structural and cultural dynamics that appear robust across contexts, while acknowledging that local enactments of headship vary. Data analysis followed a three-stage meta-synthesis adapted from meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988). First, findings were inductively coded through reciprocal translation, preserving original meanings while identifying leadership practices, constraints, outcomes, and contextual influences. Second, related codes were grouped into higher-order themes to reveal patterns across studies. Finally, a line-of-argument synthesis integrated these themes into an explanatory narrative illustrating how school headship is enacted and constrained in Tanzanian schools. With some exceptions, themes supported by at least three independent studies were retained to ensure analytical robustness.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation across methods, regions, and school contexts, inclusion of grey literature, and transparent reporting of study counts per theme. Dependability was supported by detailed documentation of search, selection, and analytical procedures. Methodologically, this study consolidates dispersed research on Tanzanian school headship into a coherent national evidence base. By applying qualitative meta-synthesis, it provides a contextually grounded alternative to simplified or heroic leadership narratives, demonstrating the value of synthesis-based

approaches for advancing educational leadership theory and practice in sub-Saharan Africa.

Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools

AI tools were used to improve the language, readability, and organisation of this manuscript. The tools were used for editorial purposes (e.g., grammar correction and paraphrasing), and not for generating content, analysing data, or making conclusions. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who retains full responsibility for the work.

Results and Discussion

Objective 1: Identify the dominant leadership orientations adopted by school heads

Empirical evidence (Table 2) indicates that school headship in Tanzania is characterised by a coexistence of multiple leadership orientations, with transformational and democratic practices forming the dominant pattern. These orientations are expressed through vision articulation, teacher motivation, and participatory decision-making, and are associated in the literature with improved teacher morale, instructional engagement, and learner outcomes. However, rather than operating as pure leadership styles, these practices appear to function as adaptive responses to institutional expectations that require both motivational leadership and administrative compliance.

Alongside these dominant orientations, servant leadership emerges more clearly in rural settings, where leadership is often reframed through relational and community-oriented logics. Its emphasis on humility, listening, and service suggests that leadership authority is partly constructed through social legitimacy, which in turn strengthens trust and school–community relations (Rashid & Shirima, 2024). In parallel, instructional and pedagogical leadership reflects a more school-internal focus, particularly through supervision,

feedback, and support for learner transitions. These practices position the school head as a mediator of teaching quality rather than solely an administrative authority, aligning leadership more directly with learning outcomes (Chiwamba et al., 2022; Ephraim et al., 2024).

In contrast, managerial and administrative responsibilities appear to reconfigure leadership priorities by reallocating time and cognitive focus toward compliance, budgeting, and reporting requirements. This creates an operational tension in which instructional leadership becomes episodic rather than sustained, particularly in contexts where accountability demands are high. Ethical leadership, while conceptually associated with strengthened legitimacy and school discipline, appears dependent on the broader moral and institutional environment in which leadership is enacted, rather than being fully determined by individual leader behaviour (Bahati & Mbughi, 2025; Mwakalinga, 2025).

Distributed leadership is evident in policy discourse and in some school practices, but its actualisation remains uneven. Although it has the potential to expand teacher agency and organisational learning, its implementation is constrained by hierarchical authority structures and institutional norms that continue to centralise decision-making at the level of the head (Mwakabenga, 2025). Similarly, gender-responsive leadership highlights a persistent structural asymmetry: while inclusive leadership practices may improve participation in some contexts, women's access to leadership roles and authority remains mediated by broader institutional and cultural constraints (Bayo & Silayo, 2024; Bush et al., 2022).

These patterns suggest that leadership orientations in Tanzanian schools are not discrete behavioural choices but contextually shaped configurations that are continuously adjusted in response to institutional demands. The extent to which transformational, instructional, or distributed leadership translates into observable school improvement is therefore not uniform, but conditioned by resource availability, governance structures, and socio-cultural norms.

This aligns with evidence that leadership effectiveness is context-dependent and mediated by systemic conditions rather than individual style alone (Leithwood et al., 2020; Day et al., 2016; Gronn, 2009; Pont et al., 2008).

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce Contingency Theory, which positions leadership effectiveness as a function of fit between leader behaviour and situational conditions (Fiedler, 1967). Within this frame, administrative overload does not simply reduce leadership capacity but actively restructures leadership enactment by privileging compliance-oriented tasks over instructional engagement. Similarly, Distributed Leadership Theory clarifies that leadership dispersal is not automatic but depends on enabling institutional conditions; where hierarchical norms remain strong, delegation tends to be symbolic rather than functional (Spillane, 2006). Gender-responsive leadership further illustrates that inclusive practices cannot be understood solely as individual leadership choices, but as outcomes of deeper institutional and cultural structures that shape who can exercise authority and how.

In synthesis, Tanzanian school heads operate within a multi-layered leadership environment in which transformational, instructional, ethical, distributed, and gender-responsive orientations coexist but are unevenly enabled. Their effectiveness is therefore not a function of leadership style alone, but of the interaction between governance arrangements, resource constraints, historical institutional legacies, and socio-cultural expectations. This implies that strengthening school leadership requires interventions that extend beyond skill development to include structural and institutional recalibration, consistent with broader evidence on context-dependent leadership effectiveness (Pont et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Table 2: Synthesised Leadership Orientations of School Heads

Leadership Orientation	Core Focus	Empirical Emphasis	Key Studies
Transformational	Vision, motivation, change leadership	Improves morale, effort, student outcomes	Kayombo et al. (2025); Simiyu (2024); Mahamba (2023); Komba (2025); Ferdinandi & Kiwonde (2023)
Servant	Service, relational leadership	Strengthens trust and community relations	Rashid & Shirima (2024)
Instructional	Teaching supervision, learning support	Enhances teaching quality and learner outcomes	Chiwamba & Kigobe (2022); Chiwamba et al. (2022); Chiwamba (2022); Ephraim et al. (2024)
Managerial	Administration, compliance, finance	Limits time for instructional leadership	John (2025); Vuje et al. (2025); Mwita (2022)
Ethical/Moral	Values, discipline, integrity	Strengthens school climate and legitimacy	Bahati & Mbughi (2025); Mwakalinga (2025)
Distributed	Shared leadership, teacher involvement	Improves ownership; limited by hierarchy	Mwakabenga (2025)
Gender-responsive	Inclusion, women leadership	Improves participation but constrained by norms	Bayo & Silayo (2024); Mbepera (2023); Mbalilaki & Onyango (2022); Mrema (2023); Makere (2025); Shemahonge et al. (2022); Bush et al. (2022); Nemes (2025)

Objective 2: Examine the structural, institutional, and cultural constraints shaping school headship practice

School headship in Tanzania operates within a structurally constrained environment in which leadership practice is shaped by

interacting resource, governance, professional, ethical, and cultural conditions. Rather than functioning as a neutral implementation space, schools reflect institutional pressures that systematically mediate what leadership can achieve in practice (Table 3).

Resource scarcity constitutes a foundational constraint. Chronic underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, and shortages of teaching and learning materials directly shape the operational scope of school heads, narrowing attention toward day-to-day survival management at the expense of strategic and instructional leadership. These conditions also influence teacher motivation and classroom practice, reinforcing inequalities in instructional quality across schools. This pattern aligns with broader evidence that leadership effectiveness is contingent on material adequacy and that resource deprivation amplifies disparities in educational outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020; Day et al., 2016).

Governance arrangements introduce an additional layer of constraint. Despite formal decentralisation reforms, school leadership remains embedded within centrally regulated accountability structures and, in some cases, local political influence. This configuration limits decision-making autonomy and reduces the strategic agency of school heads. Such dynamics are consistent with decentralised systems where policy devolution does not automatically translate into operational independence at the school level (Pont et al., 2008; Gronn, 2009). From a Contingency Theory perspective, this misalignment between leadership roles and contextual constraints explains why leadership practices that are effective in more enabling environments are difficult to sustain under conditions of bureaucratic control and political interference (Fiedler, 1967).

Professional capacity constraints further shape leadership enactment. Many school heads assume leadership positions without sufficient preparation for instructional leadership, strategic planning, or school development management. This produces a structural gap between role expectations and practical competence, reinforcing reliance on routine administrative compliance rather than pedagogical leadership.

This finding challenges “heroic” assumptions of leadership by emphasising the dependence of leadership effectiveness on systemic preparation and institutional support rather than individual capability alone (Bush & Glover, 2025; Manaseh et al., 2023; Pont et al., 2008).

Ethical and cultural conditions also operate as mediating forces. Incidences of teacher misconduct, corruption, and weakened professional norms undermine trust relations within schools and reduce organisational coherence, thereby weakening leadership authority and legitimacy. In parallel, gendered institutional norms continue to shape leadership access and authority, with women facing structural barriers that persist even after appointment to leadership positions. These patterns indicate that leadership outcomes are embedded within broader socio-cultural structures rather than determined solely by competence or formal role assignment (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush et al., 2022).

Supervisory and motivational dynamics further constrain leadership effectiveness. High administrative workloads, teacher resistance, and weak enforcement systems reduce the consistency and depth of instructional supervision. At the same time, unfavourable working conditions and limited motivational incentives suppress innovation and engagement among both heads and teachers. Although Distributed Leadership Theory emphasises delegation and shared responsibility as mechanisms for enhancing organisational learning, its practical application remains limited by hierarchical norms and weak institutional support structures (Spillane, 2006).

These constraints interact rather than operate independently, producing a layered institutional environment in which school leadership is continuously negotiated. Leadership outcomes are therefore structurally contingent, shaped by the interplay of resource availability, governance design, professional capacity, ethical norms, and socio-cultural expectations. This suggests that strengthening school leadership requires interventions that go beyond individual capacity development to include structural reform, institutional support systems, and cultural transformation, consistent with evidence on context-dependent leadership effectiveness (Pont et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Table 3: Structural, Institutional, and Cultural Constraints Shaping School Headship

Constraint Category	Core Domain	Key Pattern	Empirical	Key Studies
Resource constraints	Funding, infrastructure, learning materials	Resource limit action	shortages leadership and instructional support	John (2025); Mwita (2022); Chacha (2022); Mpate & Sango (2024)
Governance & political constraints	Decentralisation, accountability, interference	Political administrative controls	and restrict autonomy	Kapelela et al. (2024); Vuje et al. (2025)
Professional capacity constraints	Training, preparation, leadership skills	Limited preparation weakens and leadership	preparation strategic and instructional leadership	Bush & Glover (2025); Manaseh et al. (2023); Chacha (2022); Mwita (2022)
Ethical & behavioural constraints	Corruption, misconduct, professionalism	Ethical weaken institutional legitimacy	lapses trust and	Bahati & Mbughi (2025); Mwakalinga (2025)
Gendered & cultural constraints	Patriarchy, norms, exclusion	Gender restrict leadership participation	norms women's	Bayo & Silayo (2024); Mbalilaki & Onyango (2022); Mbepera (2023); Makere (2025); Nemes (2025); Bush et al. (2022)
Supervisory constraints	Workload, compliance pressure, resistance	Administrative burden supervision effectiveness	reduces	Chiwamba & Kigobe (2022); Chiwamba et al. (2022); Chiwamba (2022)
Motivational constraints	Morale, incentives, job satisfaction	Low reduce of teachers and leaders	incentives motivation and	Mgaiwa & Hamis (2022); Nobeye (2025); Mpate & Sango (2024)

Objective 3: Explore recurring gaps between policy ideals and leadership enactment

As presented in Table 4, school leadership policy in Tanzania functions primarily as a normative framework whose translation into

practice is uneven across institutional contexts. Across the reviewed studies, a consistent pattern emerges: policy aspirations and leadership enactment diverge not because of policy absence, but due to structural and institutional conditions that mediate implementation. The gap therefore reflects an implementation dynamic shaped by organisational culture, governance arrangements, and material constraints rather than a simple policy failure.

Across leadership domains, transformational and participatory leadership remain central in policy discourse, yet school-level practice is predominantly characterised by bureaucratic and compliance-oriented routines. This indicates a structural reorientation of leadership under conditions where administrative workload, accountability demands, and resource constraints dominate organisational priorities. In such contexts, leadership is operationalised through procedural compliance rather than strategic or instructional engagement. This pattern reinforces the argument that leadership enactment is structurally conditioned rather than primarily dependent on individual leadership orientation (Gronn, 2009; Pont et al., 2008).

Table 4: Policy–Practice Gaps in School Leadership

Gap Type	Analytical Focus	Empirical Pattern	Key Studies
Leadership ideals vs practice	Transformational rhetoric vs managerial dominance	Policy promotes transformational leadership; practice remains bureaucratic	Kayombo et al. (2025); Mwita John (2025)
Gender equity gap	Formal parity vs male dominance	Women remain underrepresented despite equality policies	Bayo & Silayo (2024); Mbalilaki & Onyango (2022); Makere Nemes (2025); Bush et al. (2022)
Ethical standards gap	Moral leadership vs misconduct	Ethical norms inconsistently applied in school practice	Bahati & Mbughi (2025); Mwakalinga (2025)
Decentralisation gap	Autonomy policy vs central control	School autonomy constrained by political and administrative control	Kapelela et al. (2024); Vuje et al. (2025)
Training–practice gap	Capacity building vs weak field application	Leadership training shows limited transfer to practice	Bush & Glover (2025); Manaseh et al. (2023); Mwita (2022)
Instructional leadership gap	Pedagogical priority vs administrative overload	Instructional leadership constrained by managerial demands	Chiwamba (2022); Chiwamba et al. (2022); John (2025)

Gender equity reveals a persistent institutional gap between formal policy commitments and leadership representation. Despite explicit policy commitments to parity, women remain underrepresented in headship positions. The persistence of this pattern indicates that leadership selection and progression are shaped by embedded socio-cultural and institutional logics that extend beyond formal policy frameworks. Patriarchal norms, limited access to mentorship structures, and subtle institutional bias function as reinforcing

mechanisms that restrict leadership mobility, even in the presence of formal equality provisions (Bayo & Silayo, 2024; Bush et al., 2022). In this sense, gender equity outcomes are structurally mediated rather than policy-determined.

A similar disconnection is evident in relation to ethical leadership. While policy frameworks emphasise integrity, accountability, and moral leadership, empirical studies continue to report instances of misconduct and weak professional norms in school environments. This suggests that ethical leadership is not solely a function of normative guidance but is contingent on the robustness of accountability systems and the strength of institutionalised professional cultures. Where these systems are weak, ethical standards remain inconsistently enacted despite their formal articulation (Day et al., 2016).

Decentralisation reforms further illustrate the structural limits of policy translation. Although designed to expand school-level autonomy, evidence indicates that decision-making authority for school heads remains partially constrained by central oversight and local political interference. This configuration produces a hybrid governance structure in which formal decentralisation coexists with operational centralisation. From a Contingency Theory perspective, such misalignment between leadership roles and contextual conditions reduces the effectiveness of delegated authority and limits leadership responsiveness (Fiedler, 1967).

Professional preparation presents another dimension of the policy–practice gap. Despite expansion of leadership training initiatives, many school heads assume office with limited readiness for instructional and strategic leadership. This indicates a disconnect between formal preparation programmes and the practical demands of school leadership contexts. The persistence of this gap suggests that leadership development is not only a technical training issue but also an institutional design problem requiring stronger alignment between training content and workplace realities (Bush & Glover, 2025; Manaseh et al., 2023).

A further gap is evident in the relationship between instructional leadership rhetoric and actual time allocation. Although instructional leadership is widely recognised as a priority, administrative workload

consistently displaces sustained engagement in classroom supervision and pedagogical support. This reflects a structural tension between managerial and instructional imperatives within school systems operating under high administrative demand and limited support capacity. Similar patterns have been documented in other resource-constrained systems where bureaucratic pressures systematically displace instructional leadership functions (Leithwood et al., 2020; Pont et al., 2008).

These findings indicate that school leadership policy in Tanzania operates as a structured set of expectations whose realisation is mediated by governance design, resource distribution, institutional culture, and professional capacity. The observed gaps are therefore not incidental deviations but systematic outcomes of contextual constraints that reshape how leadership is enacted. From this perspective, improving leadership effectiveness requires attention not only to policy formulation/training expansion, but to the institutional conditions that enable or restrict policy translation into practice.

Conclusion

The synthesis of empirical research indicates that Tanzanian school heads predominantly employ transformational, democratic, instructional, and ethical leadership practices. Yet, the effectiveness of these orientations is heavily shaped by structural, institutional, and cultural factors, including resource scarcity, centralised governance, administrative overload, gendered norms, and professional capacity gaps. Persistent gaps between policy ideals and actual practice suggest that leadership outcomes depend not only on individual competence but also on broader systemic and contextual realities. Overall, these findings highlight that school headship in Tanzania is pluralistic and contextually constrained, rather than uniformly heroic or transformational. By integrating 32 dispersed studies, this synthesis surpasses isolated regional observations to construct a coherent, national-level narrative of how leadership ideals are systematically translated into practice within these constraints.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made. First, leadership development initiatives should be multi-dimensional, combining formal training with experiential, context-sensitive learning, to help heads navigate the constraints imposed by governance, resource, and cultural realities. Second, policy reforms should address structural and systemic barriers, including ensuring adequate resource allocation, clarifying accountability frameworks, and fostering ethical, inclusive, and collaborative school cultures. Third, targeted measures to promote gender equity in leadership, such as mentorship, networking opportunities, and institutional support, may enhance the participation and influence of women heads. Finally, future research could investigate how leadership practices interact with local socio-cultural norms, decentralisation dynamics, and professional development pathways, to identify strategies that are both contextually grounded and scalable across diverse Tanzanian schools.

Conflict of Interest

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

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