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Educational Leadership in Nepal: Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Nepal's political transitions have reshaped educational leadership, shifting expectations from centralized administration toward participatory governance under federalism. However, expanded educational access and emerging management structures coexist with persistent leadership challenges. This paper examines the historical development of educational leadership in Nepal, interprets contemporary practices through relevant global leadership theories, and identifies priorities for strengthening leadership capacity within the federal system.
Materials and Methods: The paper adopts a historical and conceptual approach, synthesizing accounts of Nepal's educational and political development with relevant leadership theories. The analysis considers leadership practices, systemic shortcomings, and strategies for developing leadership capacity in a federal governance context.
Results: The analysis identifies progress in educational access and management systems alongside uneven leadership capacity. Persistent concerns include politicization, inadequate preparation for leadership roles, and limited use of evidence in decision-making. These challenges highlight the need to connect participatory governance aspirations with professional preparation, ethical practice, and leadership approaches responsive to local educational contexts.
Conclusion: Nepal's educational transformation requires sustained investment in professionalized, ethically grounded, learning-centered, and context-responsive leadership. Priorities include strengthening leadership preparation and continuing professional development, supporting evidence-informed decision-making, and embedding inclusive participation in school governance. As a historical and conceptual analysis, the paper offers directions for policy and leadership development rather than empirical estimates of their effects on educational outcomes.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, Decentralization, Federalism, Ethical Leadership, Nepal

Introduction

Education is commonly recognized as a foundational driver of human development, social mobility, national cohesion, and economic progress. The education systems do not improve through policy declaration alone; they improve when leadership at national, municipal, and school levels creates shared direction, mobilizes resources, develops professional capacity, and sustains accountability and trust. Contemporary scholarship repeatedly emphasizes that leadership is among the most influential school-level factors affecting student learning, especially when leadership is oriented toward improving instruction and building professional learning cultures (Bush, 2020; Hallinger, 2011). Leadership is therefore not an occupation but a style that influences what schools cherish, the collaboration among teachers, and whether students really have opportunities for learning. Nepal's educational leadership has always been closely intertwined with the country's political history and governance changes. The political eras have shaped the current political views on the nature of access to education, the role of schools, and the exercise of authority in schools. In this way, traditions of leadership have embraced powerful administrative and compliance dimensions and metamorphosed into more learning-focused, ethical, and professional leadership. Leaders of today are under an unprecedented barrage of national priorities for access to quality, equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning. Principals are required to assume various roles, including those of administrators, instructional guides, strategic planners, ethical role models, community mobilizers, and crisis managers.

The expectations have been heightened even more by federalism, which transfers the responsibilities to the local governments and necessitates more localized problem-solving (Schaffner et al., 2020). This conceptual paper takes a journey through the different dimensions of educational leadership in Nepal. It first illustrates how the concept of educational leadership has evolved and what the leadership-related accomplishments are. It then synthesizes distinct theories of leadership and illustrates how and in what manner each might be valuable in the Nepalese schooling context. Finally, it identifies and illustrates how current practices of leadership and its structural shortcomings are impeding improvement. Throughout,

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the paper emphasizes that leadership strengthening is not merely an individual capacity issue; it is also a systems design issue involving governance, incentives, workload, professional learning infrastructure, and ethical accountability. Headteachers of community schools tend to have significant workload-related responsibilities beyond just running the school: producing reports, maintaining financial records, coordinating with local government agencies, managing staff, and engaging in community relations (Khanal & Regmi, 2024; Mainali, 2024). The trend toward increasing emphasis on the role of headteachers within federal systems has increased these responsibilities, thereby decreasing the amount of time available to headteachers for observing instruction, mentoring teachers, and providing feedback on instruction and pedagogy. The inability of headteachers to focus on instructional leadership causes teacher isolation and diminished growth in their professional performance, resulting in stagnation in student achievement (Pande et al., 2026; Sadaula & Thapa, 2025). Ultimately, over time, this trend reinforces the notion that headteachers are office workers and not instructional leaders. Fragmented mandates also contribute to the nature of administrative overload. Schools are spending time producing documents instead of using the data to improve when multiple agencies are asking for the same data in different formats. This is not only inefficient but also a barrier to a data culture of evidence-informed decisions and teaching.

Objectives

To explore the history of the development of educational leadership in Nepal.

To study present-day issues and problems associated with educational leadership in Nepal.

Research Questions

Why is educational leadership in Nepal characterized by significant challenges?

How can educational leadership in Nepal be enhanced to become more effective and ethical?

Literature review

Historical Trajectory of Educational Leadership in Nepal

Leadership during the Rana Regime (1846–1951): limited access and administrative oversight

The Rana era rule of education has been referred to by historians as a highly centralized decision of education, and the usher figure of education was almost everywhere in granting and access to the education of the people (Dhamala, 2019; Shah, 2023). Therefore, formal education remained socially selective in nature, fulfilling wider state priorities and controlling the opportunities for community participation in the process of professional educational governance. Therefore, the leadership during this period should be understood in the context of the prevailing systems of political authority rather than in the framework of currently known leadership practices that imply the use of educational or participatory methods. The Rana period left its legacy in terms of institutional practices that lasted beyond the transition in governance. In such administrations, in which governance is centered on control rather than learning, the processes of innovation are highly dangerous, and the public mission of schooling remains underdeveloped. This situation explains why, in post-transition and new changes in Nepal, it has been necessary to focus on changing the minds of its leaders.

Democratic transition and growth after 1951: modernization with a central government

After 1951, Nepal started to modernize by building more schools and important places like Tribhuvan University. There were more administrators at the school, district, and ministry levels. However, the centralization of power continued, and most of the leadership positions were awarded according to administrative experience and not through any educational leadership training program (Carney & Bista, 2009). In this period, the sole indicator of the success of leadership was the growth of the system in terms of building new schools and enrollment. These accomplishments significantly contributed to nation-building, but they did not necessarily prioritize instructional quality and professional development. Centralizing authority typically positioned school leaders as executors of policies designed outside their purview. As a result, the schools had less autonomy, there was reduced initiative for developing local leadership, and leadership became less responsive to the local context. Moreover, it also deepened the

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perception of leadership from a managerial perspective, whereby adherence and reporting were given more importance than instructional improvement, professional learning, and community engagement.

Panchayat era (1960–1990): centralized uniformity and managerial leadership

The system of schools with a uniform syllabus and a crusade for a strong national language has integrated the centralized system of administration and the integrity of the nation through the system of Panchayat. Analysis of the literature on education governance during the Panchayat period shows that the leadership role was mainly centred on the implementation of policies and procedures developed centrally in relation to nation-building and state formation objectives (Bennike, 2015). Educational leaders had limited autonomy and few opportunities to make decisions relevant to their local contexts. Research on schooling in the Panchayat era indicates that nationalised education was conducive to the creation of a relatively uniform national space but also reproduced distinctions associated with language, caste and geography (Bennike, 2015). This evidence supports an interpretation of schooling as both a state-building project and a site for negotiating social differences. The predominant form of governance was the institutional habit of rule-following leadership, one of the central legacies of this era. Merriam-Webster defines rules as "an authoritative precedent." There can be uniformity due to rules. But it can also suffocate creativity, discretion, and educational risk-taking. The subsequent reforms emphasizing school-based planning, teacher collaboration, and community participation also met the same command-and-control rather than participative leadership culture.

Post-1990 democratic reforms: community participation and shared governance

Post-1990 democratic reforms ushered in a better understanding of decentralization and community participation. Some of these programs, like the Basic and Primary Education Program (BPEP) and Education for All (EFA), strengthened the SMCs and focused on more school-based management and partnerships between schools and community-based development actors (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016). These successive reform instruments improved gender-inequity indicators and access to education, but these changes are not solely due to leadership. They display investments from government, policies at the national level, reforms related to community schooling, choices made at the household level, and programs set by development partners. As for leadership, it can be viewed as an instrument to interpret and execute the reforms (Carney & Bista, 2009; World Bank, 2023).

Decentralization accelerated the transfer of responsibility, but communities lacked the necessary infrastructure and capacity to support the increased governance responsibilities. In cases where community governance was politicized or where community members were not well prepared to govern their own schools, local community power structures dominated school decision-making, rather than the priorities of the school (Edwards, 2011; Khanal, 2013; Timilsina et al., 2026). Decentralization has produced mixed results regarding leadership; some communities were able to leverage increased participation and local ownership through decentralization, while others lacked consistent accountability and instructional focus. Additionally, the process of decentralization illustrates the need for effective preparation for educational leaders to constructively manage participation, mediate conflict among stakeholders, and keep teaching and learning the primary focus of school improvement.

Federalism after 2015: expanded responsibility with uneven capacity

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) established federalism as the system of government and transferred most of the responsibilities of local governments. As a result, municipalities became the main actors in the management of schools, handling the budget, managing teachers, supervising, and coordinating. The scope of the school leaders' roles widened, which demanded their abilities in strategic planning, resource management, instructional leadership, stakeholder engagement, and data use. The introduction of federalism has led to the emergence of local leadership and planning that is tailored to the community; hence, local governments can make education more compatible with the needs of the community and also obtain resources from the locality. Federalism also exposed capacity gaps across municipalities and schools, especially in rural and marginalized areas. Evidence emerging shows that there are considerable differences among municipalities in their administrative capabilities, technical expertise, experience in educational

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planning, and availability of resources. These factors govern the work of education leaders and justify the variation in the effectiveness of leadership styles across regions (Daly et al., 2020; Schaffner et al., 2024).

Leadership has been lacking in quality in the wake of increasing rather than decreasing administrative demands, given the rapidly expanding responsibilities but not leadership development. Leadership can also spend an inordinate amount of time responding to report requirements, such that the focus becomes compliance overload, rather than improving teaching and learning, driven by conflicting or ambiguous policies at different levels. Both these suggest that any time there is decentralized governance, there is a need for authority and integrated policymaking, governance structures, and capacity building (Shrestha, 2024). Such changes in state statutes and constitutions toward greater local responsibility have facilitated context-responsive decision-making activities but have also raised questions about local role and capacity and intergovernmental coordination. Research on the early federal experience in Nepal has shown that decentralization does not automatically lead to autonomy and greater accountability of schools (Daly et al., 2020; Schaffner et al., 2024). Devolution of responsibilities will not alone improve local governance, but it has changed the institutional structure of federalism and the context of educational leadership. The effect of federalism will depend on the strength of local government institutions, on the quality and clarity of the division of responsibilities, and on the structure of coordination between levels of government and linkages for accountability between educational leaders, principals, teachers, and communities. Federalization of active Ecuador in Nepal: connection system and institutional design (Daly et al., 2020; Schaffner et al., 2024). Therefore, federalism may be viewed as an enabling tool for more context-specific educational leadership, not as a sufficient indicator of improved leadership or achievement.

Governance and leadership in Nepal's higher education institutions have faced persistent challenges concerning appointment procedures, institutional autonomy, and academic management. In its consultation framework, the High-Level National Education Commission (2018) identified concerns about the legality, credibility, and competitiveness of procedures for appointing university officials, teachers, and staff. The World Bank (2021) subsequently highlighted weaknesses in governance, regulatory arrangements, and accountability, noting that centralized academic management constrained teaching quality and faculty research capacity by limiting faculty participation in curriculum design, teaching materials, examinations, and research. These assessments indicate a need to strengthen credible and competitive appointment procedures, institutional autonomy, and participatory academic governance. They do not, however, establish that federal control over appointments directly prevents educational innovation.

Evidence concerning leadership appointments in higher education should be interpreted separately from evidence concerning school leadership. Universities and schools operate under different institutional arrangements, appointment procedures, and accountability structures. The reported centralization of university appointments therefore provides context for broader debates about professional autonomy and governance, but it cannot by itself establish that school-headteacher appointments follow the same pattern. Evidence specifically concerning schools, headteachers, school management committees, or local education authorities must support claims about school leadership selection and politicization.

Accomplishments in Nepal's education system linked to leadership

In Nepal, there are, in fact, improvements in schools, equal opportunities between boys and girls, early childhood care, and involvement of the community (Dhakal, 2019; Khanal & Bhatta, 2022). Such changes suggest a synergy between the reforms in the country, partnership aid, and choices of families and local efforts and public spending. School leaders can help facilitate and organize local programs. The studies we examined do not demonstrate that leadership is the sole factor contributing to these outcomes. Enrollment of children in the community, development of infrastructure, donor and NGO partnerships, and betterment of school governance were all results of effective leadership. Often, the headteachers and teachers served as implementers of change by managing the gap between what policies demanded and what reality offered, using what was available to keep the schools operating and the community engaged (Dhakal & Panta, 2026; Khanal & Regmi, 2024; Shrestha & Dangal, 2024). In addition, mechanisms of community participation served as a platform for accountability and resource generation. The literature reviewed

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suggests that leadership capacity differs among schools and municipalities. We have made progress in terms of access to education across the nation, but there is not sufficient evidence to attribute that progress to leadership. Government can matter for local implementation of reforms, but much depends on the policy context, economic-social, and institutional contexts.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework that will guide this literature review. It connects context and institutions with leadership practices and organizational processes as well as educational outcomes. Governance structures, resources available, politics, and sociocultural factors in the local environment affect the opportunities and challenges facing educational leaders. Leadership behaviors could affect teachers' collaboration, use of data, community involvement, and accountability. We expect these processes to enhance teaching and create more equitable learning opportunities, although wider institutional and socioeconomic conditions also influence the outcomes. The framework is a conceptual synthesis of the reviewed literature and is intended to organize the analysis rather than establish causal relationships empirically.

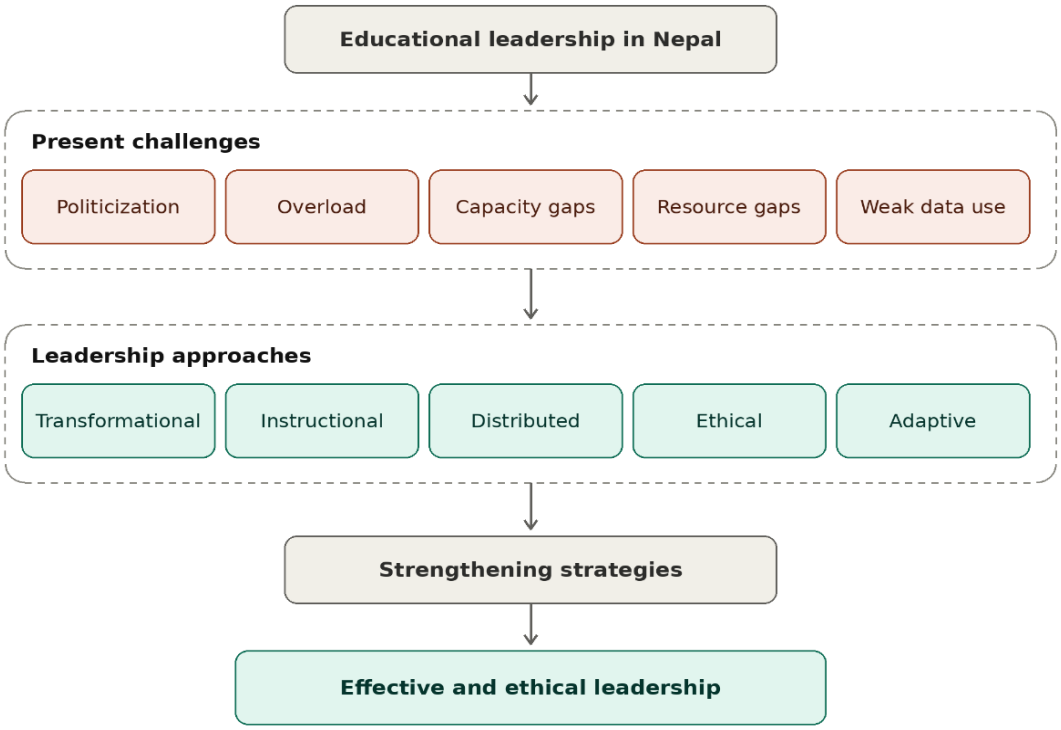


Figure 1. Problem–Response Framework

Analytical framework

This article uses an integrated context–practice–process–outcome framework. The first component comprises contextual and institutional conditions: federal and local governance arrangements, political influence, role clarity, funding and staffing, school location and size, language and cultural diversity, and household socioeconomic conditions. These conditions shape the discretion and resources available to leaders. The second component comprises leadership practices: instructional leadership (attention to teaching, assessment, and teacher learning); distributed leadership (shared expertise and decision-making); ethical leadership (fairness, transparency, and protection from conflicts of interest); transformational leadership (shared purpose and organizational learning); and adaptive leadership (collective diagnosis and

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learning under uncertainty). These perspectives are complementary but not interchangeable; each highlights a different mechanism.

The third component comprises the processes through which leadership may influence school improvement: teacher collaboration and professional learning, the use of assessment and administrative data, resource allocation, family and community participation, and the establishment of trust and accountability. The fourth component addresses intended outcomes like enhanced teaching practices, greater inclusion, better utilization of resources, and improved learning opportunities. These outcomes are not assumed to follow automatically from leadership; they are also influenced by funding, teacher availability, policy coherence, and wider social inequalities. Feedback from implementation and learning data should inform subsequent decisions. The framework therefore treats leadership as relational and institutionally constrained, rather than as the independent action of an individual principal.

In Nepal, this framework requires attention to variation among municipalities, mountain/hill/Terai settings, urban and rural schools, community and institutional schools, language communities, and socioeconomic groups. Global theories are used as analytical lenses rather than universal templates. The contribution of this paper is to connect these lenses to the governance conditions and implementation constraints documented in Nepal-focused research and to derive recommendations that address both leadership capability and the institutional conditions enabling leaders to act.

Integrating leadership perspectives into the analytical framework

The leadership perspectives applied in this article are not alternative but complementary. Improving instructional leadership is central to the work to improve teaching, assessment, and learning by teachers. Distributed leadership gives understanding of how this work can be shared between the headteacher and teacher and other school stakeholders. Transformational leadership offers the aspect of shared vision and organizational change, while ethical leadership offers guidelines for fairness and professionalism. On the other hand, adaptive leadership takes into account the collective learning that is needed when issues in education cannot be solved technically. These perspectives operate within institutional conditions shaped by governance arrangements, resource availability, political influence, and social inequalities. The analytical contribution of this review is therefore not to introduce a new universal leadership theory but to integrate these perspectives into a context-responsive framework that connects Nepal's governance conditions with leadership practices, organizational processes, and intended educational outcomes.

The contribution of this paper lies in connecting leadership practices with the institutional conditions that enable or constrain them in Nepal's federal education system. Rather than treating leadership effectiveness as an individual attribute of headteachers, the framework examines how governance arrangements, political influence, administrative workload, resource inequalities, and sociocultural diversity shape the possibilities for instructional improvement. The five leadership perspectives serve complementary analytical functions. Teaching and learning and instructional leadership, shared responsibility and collective expertise and distributed leadership, shared purpose and change and transformational leadership, fairness and accountability and ethical leadership, and shared learning in the midst of complexity and uncertainty and adaptive leadership. Their integration provides a context-responsive framework for interpreting leadership challenges and developing recommendations at school, municipal, and system levels. Future empirical research will examine the framework as a conceptual synthesis, rather than a validated causal model.

Global Leadership Theories and Their Relevance for Nepal

Leadership theories offer conceptual frameworks that in themselves are never the solutions. The effectiveness of the frameworks lies in their application. Leadership development in Nepal can benefit from the available global frameworks while remaining aware of local realities.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership focuses on vision, motivation, moral purpose, and change (Bass & Riggio, 2006). School transformational leaders build a common vision, a culture of professionalism, and develop new ideas. Transformational leadership should be chosen in Nepal because schools must change

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the culture from "rule-following" to learning and improvement, which is a very compelling reason. Transformational approaches will aid in improving teacher cooperation, making learner-centered values even more prominent, and will make schools more inclusive. Transformational leadership needs freedom, faith in its capabilities, and competence. The development of transformational leadership is constrained when governance becomes political, when leaders fear causing or spurring conflict with those in authority, and when there is an accountability environment that encourages adherence to short-term processes or events instead of actual improvements in instructional practices. Therefore, Nepal's leadership strengthening efforts should not treat transformational leadership as inspirational rhetoric alone; it must be connected to concrete routines such as collaborative goal-setting, teacher learning structures, and evidence-informed improvement cycles.

Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership places teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment at the center of leadership work (Hallinger, 2011). Research suggests that leadership most strongly influences learning when it improves teaching quality and strengthens teacher learning systems. In the context of Nepal, the lack of development in instructional leadership in schools emerges from the overload on head teachers with administrative duties, leaving no time for guided supervision of teaching. In addition, the norms within certain schools might view classroom instruction as private, requiring particular sensitivity with observation and feedback. If Nepal has to enhance instructional leadership, then it will have to develop capacity building along with system redesign. Leaders require training to supervise, coach, develop curriculum, and be literate in assessing students. Additionally, leaders must have time, tools, and supportive expectations to work with teachers in a productive manner. The respect by all the professional learning community members can transform the school culture from self, teacher focus to the learning collective for improvement.

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership emphasizes that leadership is viewed not only as a process of involving people in schools but also as a process of sharing leadership among people in a school community rather than delegating it to a single person in a school (Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership will be of benefit in schools in Nepal, where teachers only need to be involved in leadership as coordinators of subject matters, mentors, carrying out lesson study, and designing assessments, thereby making the school less dependent on the head teacher and also helping in developing capacity in schools. Without structure, however, distribution can become symbolic. If leadership is "distributed" only through extra duties without authority, training, or recognition, it may increase workload and frustration. Therefore, distributed leadership must be institutionalized through clear roles, training, supportive supervision, and recognition mechanisms, and it should be linked to instructional improvement rather than only to administrative task-sharing.

Servant and ethical leadership

Servant leadership focuses on caring for others, doing good for others, moral duty, and the health of the community (Greenleaf, 2002). Ethical leadership emphasizes fairness, transparency, integrity, and justice. For Nepal, where schools are community institutions and where politicization hampers the formation of trust, servant leaders and ethical leaders are much needed for regaining legitimacy and fostering collaboration. There is a need to protect weak students and bring justice in admission, discipline, and the supply of school needs to all. Servant leadership is associated with several cultural values emphasizing social responsibility, social unity, and common good. But ethics in leadership is not the sole virtue of the individual: it is supported by the systems in place to allow for the integrity of the whole organization. Yes, transparent processes, conflict of interest rules, fair grievance procedures, and accountability to the community can strengthen ethical leadership in general.

Adaptive leadership

This is important because it is about being able to adapt to complexity and uncertainty and to dissenting preferences to be able to lead (Heifetz et al., 2009). Natural disasters (earthquakes), migration, federalism, changes in the labour market, and changes in technology are examples of complex adaptive problems in education in Nepal. These problems cannot be solved with technical solutions alone but require

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adaptive leadership to diagnose the underlying systemic problems, build ownership among stakeholders, and learn through experimentation. For instance, ensuring an effective learning outcome in a multilingual classroom cannot be accomplished through a mere directive; it requires some teacher learning, community involvement, curriculum changes, and feedback collection. The effectiveness of adaptive leadership in Nepal largely depends on the ability of leaders to engage in collective learning and respond to evidence in their region, as well as to implement changes under the conditions of relevant limitations imposed by the institutions and resources available in schools or communities.

LEAs (Local Education Authorities) should also be involved in bridging between the government levels and be with the stakeholders and data in their locality and deal with solving the problems together. Adaptive leadership is the ability of a leader to recognize such differences between technical problems and problems that would require changing processes and relationships (especially in the case of teacher shortages, lack of resources, linguistically diverse populations, or competing demands from the community). This approach uses collaborative diagnosis, trial and error, feedback, and reflection, rather than direct directive leadership.

Corporate versus educational leadership

Corporate management values efficiency, competition, and outcome-oriented approaches, while educational management prioritizes learning, equality, inclusion, and human development goals (Bush, 2020). Nepal's increasing number of private schools means an injection of management efficiency and performance values. Several management approaches, like planning, budgeting, or monitoring, might add positively to the schools. There may also be a lack of clear intentions regarding educational goals. The most productive approach is not to reject managerial tools but to subordinate them to educational purposes. Accountability should not be a way of ranking schools but a way of improving learning. Let's be inclusive, not exclusive. We want our strategic plan to be an input to the community and student development. School leadership that embraces management and ethical qualities can result in efficient and just schools.

Table 1 Leadership perspective Synthesis

Leadership perspective	Distinct analytical contribution	Nepal-specific issue to examine
Instructional	Focuses on teaching and learning	Administrative workload and limited classroom supervision
Distributed	Explains how leadership is shared	Teacher participation, role clarity, and additional workload
Transformational	Explains shared purpose and organizational change	Moving beyond compliance toward improvement
Ethical/servant	Examines fairness, care, and legitimacy	Political influence, transparent decisions, and inclusion
Adaptive	Explains learning and collective responses to uncertainty	Federal transition, resource constraints, and local problem-solving

Methodology

It is a conceptual integration of a narrative literature review. The study aims to review the history of the leadership of education in Nepal, the persistent problems with the leadership, and the context-responsive understanding of the leadership in the current federal structure of Nepal. This is demonstrated by existing research and analysis of scholarly and policy documents, but not by data collection. Literature was retrieved from government documents, reports, and relevant literature on federalism, decentralization, educational leadership, school governance, and federalism in Nepal from Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus-indexed

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publications. The search strategy combined terms such as *"educational leadership Nepal," "school leadership Nepal," "educational governance Nepal," "decentralization and education Nepal," "federalism and school management Nepal," "instructional leadership," "distributed leadership," "digital leadership," and related terms.* Additional sources were identified through reference-list screening and citation tracing of influential publications. Source selection occurred in three stages. The initial step included checking the databases and the reference lists. In the second step, the titles and abstracts were read for inclusion in the literature concerning educational leadership, governance, federalism, and school improvement in Nepal. The third step consisted of reading the full texts of the papers to determine how they could contribute to the research questions.

The focus was on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and government publications and research reports from mainly 2002 to 2026, although key historical sources were included where necessary to explain educational developments during previous political periods. Sources were included if they dealt with educational leadership, governance, leadership development, decentralization, school management, educational reform, or related institutional issues in Nepal. Literature that is not relevant to educational leadership or the Nepali educational context was excluded. The review was not intended to be exhaustive of all available literature but to identify major themes, debates, and patterns:

Three types of sources constituted the reviewed material. First, the peer-reviewed empirical research articles were utilized to back up evidence-based claims about governance, leadership approaches, decentralization, and school development. Second, the policy documents and government reports were used to analyze the mandates, reforms, and institutions at both national and local levels. Third, theoretical and conceptual literature was utilized to analyze leadership approaches and challenges through various frameworks. Different types of evidence were treated as complementary, which led to a synthesis of knowledge about educational leadership in Nepal. Theme development followed a process. Initially, recurring concepts were identified by repeatedly reading the selected literature. Then these preliminary themes were checked against the study's research questions and the leadership theories that mattered. After rounds of tweaking themes, such as politicization, leadership preparation, instructional leadership, governance capacity, resource disparities, data use, digital leadership, and context-responsive leadership, they were put together. The analysis examined the connections between governance conditions, leadership practices, and educational outcomes by viewing themes as separate boxes.

The four steps followed in the synthesis process were (1) identification of historical developments and major policy changes that have an impact on educational leadership; (2) assessment of repetitive leadership and governance problems mentioned in the literature review; (3) interpretation of these problems by using relevant theories of leadership; and (4) incorporation of the results within a framework and evidence-based recommendations. Thus, the results obtained should be regarded as interpretive themes identified based on the literature reviewed instead of empirical findings about the commonality of certain leadership practices in all schools or municipalities of Nepal. We enhanced credibility by drawing on multiple source types and comparing scholarly, policy, and historical materials. This study adopts a narrative review design rather than a systematic review protocol; the findings should be understood as an interpretive synthesis rather than a comprehensive inventory of all publications on educational leadership in Nepal. Although we consulted multiple databases and source types, we may not have captured all relevant studies, and thematic interpretation reflects scholarly judgment.

Results

The following themes emerged from the reviewed literature and should be interpreted as analytical syntheses rather than empirical findings derived from primary data collection. These themes represent recurring issues, challenges, and leadership considerations identified across historical, policy, and scholarly sources.

Politicization and governance instability

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Politics influence SMC functioning, leadership appointment, resource allocation, and teaching staff. Politicization undermines professional legitimacy and can create fear, mistrust, and short-term decision-making. Governance instability, frequent transfers, shifting municipal priorities, and overlapping authority discourage long-term planning and innovation. Under such conditions, leaders are likely to be more concerned about avoiding conflict rather than working towards instructional enhancement, and accountability is allowed to be selective rather than equitable. One of the main tasks of the leader, under such conditions, is to retain professional integrity under political pressure. This requires both personal courage and institutional safeguards, including consistent and transparent regulations and standards.

Levels of readiness for leadership and career paths

Generally, the positions of a leader are assigned based on the experience of studying the person in the company and the power of the person in the market, but the lack of leadership skills proves the system is not highly functioning (Regmi, 2021). Training opportunities are often brief and poorly designed. In the absence of a systematic approach to preparation, a leader may not have the cognitive tools to better instruct, behave ethically, resolve conflicts, include stakeholders, and use data. In fact, an unclear pathway for school leaders can seriously diminish motivation for professional development and constrain succession planning. In many systems, well-designed leadership development is associated with developing a professional identity for a leader with appropriate standards and progression routes on which to base progress based on competence, and possibly impact.

Equity and resource disparity

Resource and endowment influence the quality of leadership. Rural schools often struggle with a shortage of teachers, inadequate infrastructure, poor ICT utilization, and low parental literacy. In such an environment, school leaders would be involved in survival management work as well as improvement management work, but with limited support. The private schools can be associated with high management control and monitoring but are associated with examination performance and competitiveness rather than participation. To meet the challenges and issues in underserved communities, equity-focused leadership will need targeted support such as additional mentoring, more flexible resources, and differentiated supervision (Khanal & Regmi, 2024). Failing to invest in equity will create unrealistic expectations on leaders; it will also create further disparities between well-resourced and marginalized schools through reform efforts.

Weak data culture and limited digital leadership

The existing data systems, like EMIS, among others, are in place; data usage is often procedural rather than analytical. The use of data to identify learning gaps for support and targeting resources is not routine in many schools. Digital leadership became more prominent during crises, such as COVID-19, but its capacity remains uneven. The digital divide can exacerbate inequality in learning, as some well-resourced schools would then offer online learning that marginalized schools cannot. This points to the systematic capacity required for digital and data literacy for leaders to interpret learning data, plan for ICT integration, and ensure that technology practices are safe and inclusive.

Although studies carried out in Thailand will provide some useful information about the digital leadership development model, the results obtained can only be applicable to the context within which they have been found. For example, in studying the administrative staff of medium-sized basic education schools in Buriram, Suksai et al. Have proved important a use and evaluation of technology support and a digital ethic (2021). Similarly, in the study, Promsuwan et al. (2019) also worked with small principals and noted similar features of development, such as professional development and the learning environment. Finally, the study by Phakhamach et al. (2025) used a mixed-methods approach and studied 415 dominant interviewees from 28 vocational faculties in Southern Thailand and proposed a digital communication, unification of management system, innovation, and digital learning ecosystem model. Overall, the findings of the studies imply that digital leadership should be perceived as broader than just device utilization, as it incorporates vision, instructional integration, learning in organizations, communication, decision-making based on data, and ethical use of technology. Their transferability to Nepal is limited. The studies are in

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Thailand's policy environment and differ by institutional type, school size, and research design; the vocational-education model should not be assumed to apply directly to Nepali community schools. For Nepal, these dimensions should be adapted to differences in connectivity, electricity, device availability, language, disability access, teacher capacity, and local-government support. Digital-leadership training should therefore be paired with infrastructure investment and safeguards for privacy, cybersecurity, accessibility, and the risk that technology may widen existing inequalities. These comparative studies inform candidate competencies; they do not demonstrate that a Thai model will improve outcomes in Nepal.

Implications of comparative digital leadership research

Taken together, these studies indicate that digital leadership development can encompass instructional integration, professional learning, organizational communication, data-informed management, and ethical technology use. However, the models represent different educational settings and policy environments. Their relevance to Nepal therefore lies in identifying competencies for critical consideration, rather than supplying ready-made models for direct adoption. In the case of Nepalese institutions, the implementation of digital leadership training should be adapted to local access to Internet connections, power supply, devices, ability to use them, accessibility, language needs, and urban municipality. The success of this process is to be evaluated not only in terms of technology use but also in terms of its influence on teaching, equality of participation, administration, and secure use of educational data.

Comparative Implications for Leadership Development in Nepal

There are three studies in Thailand that present various perspectives of building digital leadership. Suksai et al. (2021) describe the perspectives of people in educational institutions, while Promsuwan et al. (2019) help in remembering the thoughts and responses individuals have in education. (2019) consider the needs of small school managers to grow in leadership. Last but not least, Phakamach et al. (2025) describe digital leadership in vocational education. All studied research indicates that the development of digital leadership embraces not only technical skills but also instructional integration, organizational aspects, professional education, and responsible technology use as well.

However, in the case of Nepal, these competencies need to be adapted, not copied, as the importance and feasibility of digital leadership can differ greatly between urban schools, which have adequate internet connectivity, and remote schools, which lack electricity and technology resources. Therefore, leadership development should integrate professional learning opportunities with investment in contextual infrastructures, accessible resources, data protection, and consideration of whether digital practices have improved teaching quality and participation equity. These are implications for local adaptation and future evaluation, not established effects of the Thai models in Nepal.

Responsiveness to context and decolonial factors

Much of the scholarship today bears on the fact that the imported leadership models from the dominant world do not truly reflect the local languages and realities and the local knowledge traditions. While Nepal was never formally colonized, its educational systems have absorbed logics from the outside through mechanisms of regional influence, donor reforms, and global agendas that set standardized policies. A context-responsive approach invites leaders to value local epistemologies, multilingual practices, and community realities in integrating global knowledge without erasing local wisdom. This does not mean that we should ignore international standards. Rather, it means ensuring that leadership development strengthens leaders' capacity to interpret policy and theory through local geographies, cultures, and histories and to design improvement strategies that communities recognize as legitimate and meaningful.

Contextualizing leadership theories in Nepal

Context-sensitive school leadership is not about the application, in a straight-jacket approach without nexus, of the current leadership theories in Nepal. Leadership practices are mediated by the historical development of schooling, local governance arrangements, linguistic diversity, community expectations, geographical conditions, and inequalities in institutional resources (Dhakal & Panta, 2026; Khanal et al., 2023; Khanal & Ghimire, 2024). The effectiveness of distributed leadership is contingent upon having real authority, rather than simply a set of additional responsibilities. Instructional leadership must adapt to the

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situation of teacher shortages, poor infrastructure, and the presence of multiple languages that limit the training opportunities in classrooms. The decolonial approach, in turn, prompts a critical investigation into who holds knowledge in leadership decisions and whose experiences determine the areas of emphasis for schools' improvement efforts. Local languages, communities, and culturally relevant methods of participation may shape the articulation, understanding, and realization of educational objectives. This does not mean that one should abandon international theories of leadership; it means investigating their underlying assumptions and adjusting their implementation to the local context of Nepal (Dhakal et al., 2024). To illustrate, leadership strategies stressing community involvement can manifest in various aspects of multilingual and culturally diverse towns, where leadership involves linking up parents and local people through local languages and culturally appropriate decision-making. Instructional leadership practices may also require modifications in remote sites where teachers are scarce, and multigrade teaching practices are common. The case illustrates that leadership theories should be considered flexible and not universal.

Strategic Measures to Strengthen Educational Leadership in Nepal

Strengthening leadership requires coordinated action at system, municipality, and school levels. The measures below are mutually reinforcing and should be pursued as a coherent reform package rather than isolated training events.

Set up a national framework for leadership skills

In the context of Nepal, there has been an emerging need for a clear leadership competency framework that details the expectations from school leaders and municipal education officers. Core competencies should comprise learning-centered leadership, ethical governance and integrity, strategic planning and resource management, community partnership and inclusion, data literacy and evidence use, digital competence and innovation, and crisis preparedness (British Council, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). A national framework guides merit-based selection, training design, assessment, and career progression. It would also iron out confusing interpretations of what constitutes "effective leadership." This framework places the emphasis on proven skills and professional impact over seniority and political influence during evaluation.

Professionalize leadership preparation and certification

The entire corps of leaders should be mandatorily certified to ensure basic leadership skills. Preparation must be a combination of theory and practice: programmes with university links, mentoring, coaching, and internship/residency programmes. Ongoing professional development should be a cycle of needs diagnosis, learning related to needs, practice, feedback, and reflection. The structure of this cycle guarantees the application of learning into better leadership behaviour.

The contents of leadership training should encompass modules on instructional coaching, class observation, assessment literacy, inclusive education, financial management, and handling stakeholders. It should also address some of the moral dilemma situations covered in the Nepali school setting, which include political pressures in human resource management, resource allocation, and fairness. Institutions like the School of Education at Kathmandu University can address the moral dilemma scenarios.

Reduce administrative overload to enable instructional leadership.

Leaders have to improve learning, so systems have to provide time for teachers to do their work. The various methods include changing the system so that teachers report to only one level of administration, allowing administrators to handle all reporting more easily, assigning trained administrative staff to manage non-core office tasks, and using technology to minimize paperwork. In school administration, the principal may plan time every week for visiting the classrooms, holding conferences with teachers, and conducting lessons together. The local government can help by reinforcing the supervision that is more supportive and making sure that the accountability mechanisms are concentrated on the improvement of learning rather than just new documentation. Reducing the amount of work is not a luxury; it is a requirement for instructional leadership. When headteachers collaborate with teachers, they can foster professional trust, identify learning gaps, and coordinate improvement strategies.

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Institutionalize distributed leadership and professional learning communities.

Distributed leadership becomes effective when supported through structures: subject-based teacher teams, professional learning communities (PLCs), peer observation, and mentoring cycles. By recognising teachers who act as leaders (such as mentors, coordinators, and grade-level leaders), we can distribute leadership responsibilities and build up the capacity internally within the system. In Nepal, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be used to connect to the school's improvement plan and to be supported through municipal coaching visits, which will help teachers see the correlation between their practice in the classroom and common goals around student outcomes. These can also complement SMC participation by ensuring that the governance of the community is linked to improvements in pedagogy rather than restricting it to administrative management. This process can include discussions at the SMC stage to consider data on learning with the aim of collective accountability for learning.

Strengthen ethical governance and reduce politicization.

Politicking has reduced merit-based recruitment and accountability. A better definition of the SMC process and role can promote professionalism. Leadership development training on ethics would be considered incomplete without awareness of conflicts of interest, transparency, fairness in decision-making, and community accountability. Improving grievance procedures and keeping professional ethics clean might help reduce the effect of unofficial influences on the leader. For the systemic part, it would be very important for policies to be clear and consistent. Leaders feel less vulnerable to influence when policies are clear and demonstrated in equitable and communicated means. Sound governance fosters a professional ethic that honors and values leaders for their integrity.

Create leadership that is data-driven and good with technology.

EMIS and school data will help school leaders identify gaps in knowledge, support teachers, improve school attendance, and allocate funds. Data literacy ought to involve interpretation of some basic results, target setting, as well as measuring progress with simple dashboards. For example, having the evidence in hand, having learning outcomes measured quarterly with meetings, will do well to motivate schools to discuss challenges and successes. Digital leadership should include planning for ICT, managing blended learning, using technology safely, and planning for continuity during times of crisis. Developing digital capacity will mainly help in preventing marginalized schools from being left behind. Digital leadership must be supported by investments in connectivity, technology infrastructure, teacher capacity building, and learning opportunities.

Promote equity-focused leadership and targeted resource support.

Equity investments should be linked to leadership development programs. The provision of infrastructure, ICT, teachers, and learning materials should be coupled with assistance for rural and disadvantaged schools. Equity approaches to leadership enhance gender responsive leadership, inclusive leadership, leadership provision for disadvantaged learners, and culturally responsive leadership. This would require training of the leaders to address barriers to access, such as language barriers, barriers to access due to living with disability, or any form of discriminatory action.

But also, by having parents and communities as allies in building equity. By generating and sharing Warm and culturally sensitive communication and generating opportunities to support learning beyond any administrative issues, leaders can encourage even more community and family involvement in home-school links.

Encourage context-responsive and culturally grounded leadership.

Then again, context responsiveness consisted of multilingual engagement, culturally respectful community partnerships, and recognition of local knowledge traditions. The leaders need training to interpret reforms through the local realities rather than mechanically applying imported models. This does not mean rejection of global frameworks; rather, it is a call to re-center them through Nepal's diverse communities, geographies, and histories. Curriculum implementation, inclusive education, and community engagement are areas that benefit from the use of context-responsive leadership. Context-responsive leaders

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can capitalize on their knowledge of the unique culture and limitations of the community they serve to gain greater participation, customize tactics, and ultimately create and maintain trust in the community.

Table 2 Strategic Measures to Strengthen Educational Leadership in Nepal

Recommendation	Lead Actors	Key Resources	Progress Indicators
Leadership competency framework	MoEST, CEHRD, Universities	Technical experts, policy support	Framework approved and implemented
Leadership certification	Universities, Local Governments	Training budget, mentors	Certified headteachers
Reduce administrative burden	Municipalities, CEHRD	Digital reporting systems	Hours spent on instructional leadership
Digital leadership development	Municipalities, Schools	ICT, internet, training	Data use, technology integration
Ethical governance reforms	SMCs, Municipalities	Monitoring systems	Reduced complaints and disputes

Discussion

A review of literature suggests linkages between leadership and management of education in Nepal and the political regime and governance of the country. Historically, they demonstrated that there was a shift from the centralized administration to participatory governance and supportive environments. Nevertheless, longstanding institutional legacies, including bureaucratic compliance, political influence, and uneven organizational capacity, continue to shape contemporary leadership practice. Moreover, these results suggest that leadership in Nepal should not just focus on compliance with the administrative functions but should rather emphasize more on teaching, learning, ethics, cooperation, and evidence-based decision-making. Overwhelming administrative tasks make it difficult for headteachers to become instructional leaders, whereas a lack of preparation makes it challenging for them to handle complex educational roles. This situation makes transformational, instructional, distributed, ethical, and adaptive leadership theories quite advantageous in dealing with such issues, although these theories must be adapted to the Nepalese context. Distributed leadership can be quite beneficial in terms of encouraging teachers' involvement in leadership roles, whereas instructional leadership can emphasize teaching and learning.

The existence of resource inequalities and insufficient data and digital skills highlights that the effectiveness of leadership also depends on other systemic factors. Rural and disadvantaged schools need specific resources, mentoring, and professional support. Likewise, data systems should be used for both reporting and identifying learning needs, as well as for school improvement purposes. To summarize, the findings indicate a need to enhance educational leadership by adopting a holistic strategy that includes professional leadership development, administrative reprieve, ethical leadership, sharing of responsibility, evidence-based practice, and context-specific support.

This article has several limitations. First, it is a narrative and conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review; the selection and interpretation of literature may therefore be affected by database coverage, publication availability, language, and author judgment. Second, the literature does not provide uniform evidence across all provinces, municipalities, school types, linguistic communities, and levels of education. Third, policy documents establish formal mandates and stated objectives but do not, on their own, establish implementation or effects. Finally, without the primary information and only having the secondary sources, the article cannot conclude the range of problems discussed or the effects and causes of leadership on student outcomes. Future studies should apply and test the framework in different settings.

Conclusion

Educational Leadership in Nepal: Federalism or Decentralized Community Ownership? Although access, gender equity, and participatory models have advanced, politicization, uneven professional

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preparation, overburdened governance, resource imbalance, and weak curricular leadership in Nepal are obstacles to better quality. Global leadership theories could be important if applied to the context/needs in Nepal (socio-political and cultural). Improving educational leadership needs a national competency approach, professionalized preparation and credentialing, less red tape, ethical reform in governance, evidence-based and technology-driven capacity improvement, and equity-oriented investments. Ultimately, Nepal's educational future depends on leaders who can combine professionalism with moral purpose, management with pedagogy, and global knowledge with local wisdom so that schools become sites of both excellence and justice for all learners. The future of Nepal's educational leadership will depend precisely on how well the country can provide equitable quality learning under changed conditions. Several priorities stand out. First, leadership has to become decisively learning-centered; that means headteachers and municipal officials need to treat instructional improvement as core work, building in routines that support teacher learning, including coaching cycles, collaborative planning, and evidence-based reflection. Second, ethical governance must be strengthened to rebuild trust.

Moreover, the increased confidence in transparent and fair leadership produces changes and improvements in society that will be longer-lasting, and so cooperation in society is improved. Third, cities must learn to manage decentralization in a way that helps and not hinders them. Of course, city departments of education can help such learning to happen in their schools by training their staff, by linking up experts, and by sharing resources. Another is that leaders need to be prepared when things may be going wrong or lacking direction. Leaders in Nepal should be those who protect children and schools. Fifth, leaders need to be better at using data and digital resources. Evidence should be the standard, not the exception; and technology should be assisting inclusion and quality, not inequality. Lastly, leaders must continue listening to their society and to honor their cultures, language, and knowledge to comply with global goals of development such as SDG 4. Skills, moral professionalism, cultural legitimacy and adaptability: Teaching for the future.

Recommendations

Policy implications

At the system level, the leadership standards should be operationalized in terms of selection, induction, review, and promotion according to merit. Consistency in policy is critical since a lack of clarity in the mandate at different levels within the government means administrative burden and lack of focus on the learning component (Bush, 2020; Regmi, 2021). Incentives and packages can attract excellent leaders, just as rewards should be given for improvements in learning and governance. Policies can also clarify the relationship of SMCs with municipalities and schools and balance out issues of professional decision-making versus accountability. This can help decrease politicization and increase trust in the community.

Practice implications

In the municipality, they should focus on capacity building in evidence-informed planning, financial transparency, and supervisory support. Improvement in the utilization of the EMIS, as well as learning data discussions, can help make informed decisions in supporting teachers or implementing resources in rural or marginalized groups. The municipality can help forge networks for the headteachers and the teacher leaders. At a school-based level, a more instructional and distributed form of leadership can be enhanced by PLCs, peer observations, mentoring cycles, and improvement plans, which can link actions within the classroom to broader shared objectives (Hallinger, 2011; Spillane, 2006). Leaders can develop trust by implementing more transparent communication processes, equity-based decision-making practices, or participation-based processes. Such processes can eventually turn schools into a learning organization rather than a compliance organization.

Research implications

Future studies should examine leadership practice in the different contexts (rural, urban, mountain, Madhesh) to understand an impact of the governance of municipalities on the practice of school leadership

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after federalization in Nepal and an impact of the different intervention into the training in leadership for the propagation of teaching practices and betterment of learning achievements. Further, there is a need to understand culturally informed or context-specific practices in shaping leadership practice (Dhakal et al., 2024). Mixed method/qualitative studies can also help us get familiar with the interpretive or meaning-making practice employed by the leaders to address the politicization or resources issues, cultural imperatives.

Declaration — Author Form

1. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript. No funding was received for this research.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies

AI tool: Grammarly.

Purpose: Grammarly was used solely to improve language, grammar, and clarity. The authors reviewed the suggested edits and take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

3. Ethics Statement

Ethics approval was not applicable because this paper is a historical and conceptual analysis of existing literature and does not involve human participants, animals, or identifiable personal data.

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