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Strategies for Leading Meaningful, Sustainable Change in Nigeria's Basic Education System: Considerations For School Leaders

by

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Abstract

Educational leadership in basic education settings requires a deliberate balance between administrative and instructional leadership for meaningful and sustainable change. This paper focuses on addressing the systemic challenges faced by school leaders in Nigeria's basic education sector, encompassing primary and junior secondary schools using Senge's Systems Thinking framework (Senge, 2006). By drawing on extensive literature in educational leadership, school leadership, and educational change, the paper explores how school leaders can adopt holistic, innovative, and adaptive approaches to navigate their demanding roles. It emphasizes the importance of integrating diverse leadership styles and approaches to promote inclusivity, equity, and systemic improvements within the education system. The findings aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice and offer a nuanced understanding of leadership concepts and their application in basic education contexts. Grounded in best practices and evidence-based strategies, this paper ultimately provides school leaders with practical guidance to building effective and sustainable school systems.

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Introduction

Leadership has long been a subject of scholarly debate, with diverse theories emphasizing the multifaceted nature of leadership as a process of influence, group dynamics, and shared objectives (Northouse, 2022). Educational leadership is a complex and multifaceted endeavor that involves navigating numerous responsibilities to meet the needs of diverse populations including teachers, students, and other stakeholders. Leaders in basic education, particularly those serving public schools, face significant challenges in balancing administrative tasks with the critical role of instructional leadership (Leithwood et al., 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016; Grissom et al., 2021). The field of educational leadership has evolved from early trait-based and behavioral theories to models emphasizing transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership among other leadership theories (Arar & Oplatka, 2022). Increasingly, leadership for social justice, which prioritizes equity and inclusion, has gained prominence in addressing systemic problems within educational settings (Flores & Bagwell, 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016). These theoretical advancements highlight the dynamic and context-specific nature of educational leadership.

In Nigeria, basic education is fundamental in national development by providing foundational knowledge and skills (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). However, this sector faces persistent challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, untrained teachers, resource scarcity, and inequitable access (Akanbi & Jekayinfa, 2019; Odukoya et al., 2018). Basic education in Nigeria encompasses the kindergarten, primary and junior secondary schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). It is referred to as K-9 education in other countries like Canada and the United States. Basic education which is generally termed Universal Basic Education (UBE) was established to provide free and compulsory education at the primary and junior secondary levels in Nigeria (Bolaji et al., 2016). Despite the introduction of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, implementation gaps and

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inefficiencies in the system have hindered its effectiveness (Austine et al. 2013; Bolaji et al., 2016). Addressing these issues requires leadership that go beyond traditional administrative functions to embrace inclusive and systems-based approaches.

Leadership strategies grounded in Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006) offer a holistic framework for addressing these interconnected challenges by emphasizing shared vision, team learning, and long-term, sustainable change. Nigeria's public basic education sector is characterized by systemic challenges that hinder equitable access to quality education. The UBE program has faced significant implementation challenges, including teacher shortages, and weak governance structures among others; as a result, many schools at this level struggle to meet minimum educational standards (Bolaji et al., 2016).

Additionally, the lack of professional development opportunities for teachers undermines instructional quality, while poor policy implementation, complicated administrative processes as well as inefficiencies in the system slow down progress (Akanbi & Jekayinfa, 2019). These challenges are an indication of the urgent need for leadership strategies addressing both immediate concerns and underlying systemic issues. School leaders play a critical role in navigating these challenges. They must balance their administrative responsibilities with instructional leadership, advocate for resources, and build a culture of collaboration and inclusivity. However, existing research often focuses on policy analysis or individual school performance, neglecting the role of leadership in driving systemic reform (Holmes et al., 2013). The subsequent sections, in this paper, outline the background and context, the research question/sub-questions, methodology, limitations, theoretical framework, literature review, and findings/conclusions, culminating in implications for theory development and practical applications.

Background and Context

My experience with school leaders during my basic education years in Nigeria is not one that is worthy of mention. Even after more than three decades, there is yet to be a significant improvement in how school leaders (head teachers) approach leadership in primary schools. This is not to paint school leaders in Nigeria bad, but to emphasize that school leaders especially at the basic education level have fallen short of their responsibilities towards both teachers and students under their care. The challenges facing Nigeria's basic education system reflect deep-rooted leadership challenges that require holistic and sustainable solutions.

This capping project is designed to explore a critical gap in the field of educational leadership in Nigeria by emphasizing the intersection of systemic reform and leadership strategies that will benefit the basic education system. Although many studies have explored the quality of Nigerian education as well as educational management practices, there are not many explicitly exploring 'educational leadership' as it relates to school leaders in public basic education in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, explores how school leaders in Nigeria's basic education system can drive meaningful and sustainable reform by leveraging Systems Thinking and other relevant leadership approaches. It seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practical applications, and equip leaders with evidence-based strategies to create inclusive and sustainable school systems.

Question/Sub-Questions

To explore this critical gap, I ask the following question: How can school leaders advance meaningful and sustainable change in Nigeria's basic education system while balancing their administrative responsibilities with their instructional leadership roles?

Sub-Questions:

1. What leadership strategies can school leaders adopt to improve teaching quality, enhance student outcomes, and promote collaboration in Nigeria's basic education system?

2. How can school leaders empower teachers, students, and communities in diverse and resource-constrained educational settings?

3. How can the application of systems thinking address systemic challenges and create sustainable change in Nigeria's basic education system?

Method

The method used to address the question and subquestions is a critical review of the literature. To conduct the literature search for this paper, I accessed the University of Alberta's online library and focused primarily on peer-reviewed articles from databases such as ERIC, ProQuest, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar. The search was predominantly limited to scholarly journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 to ensure the inclusion of current research; however, relevant literature from outside this time frame was also incorporated—for example, the theoretical framework—to provide a more comprehensive and robust discourse. Key search terms included 'Nigerian education system,' 'basic education in Nigeria,' 'educational leadership,' 'school leaders,' and 'leadership theories' among others. Additionally, I utilized insights and literature from my previous inquiry projects and books on educational leadership, educational change, and educational policy to enrich the analysis and contextualize the findings.

Limitations

This paper is subject to several limitations. First, it is constrained by a strict timeline of three to four months—as per academic term—which limits the scope and depth of the analysis. Additionally, while insights from case studies in different contexts were drawn

upon, the specific focus on school leaders in basic education in Nigeria—comprising primary and junior secondary schools—requires nuanced, context-specific data that cannot be fully captured without direct engagement with respondents. Unfortunately, due to the lack of ethics approval for this capping project, primary data collection was not possible. As a result, the research relies exclusively on secondary sources, including journal articles, course materials, and relevant official documents, which may limit the ability to capture firsthand perspectives or validate findings through primary data. These constraints, while unavoidable, may affect the comprehensiveness and contextual applicability of the paper's conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

Anfara and Mertz (2015) describe theoretical frameworks as essential tools for guiding research, particularly in qualitative studies. They define theoretical frameworks as "any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (e.g., grand, midrange, explanatory), that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena" (p. xx). According to Anfara and Mertz, these frameworks function as lenses that shape the research process, from the formulation of questions to the interpretation of findings. Further, they argue that frameworks are not merely methodological tools but deeply embedded perspectives that influence how researchers view and analyze their subjects. This paper is guided by Senge's (2006) Systems Thinking framework, which provides a structured approach to understanding and addressing interconnected challenges in organizations, including educational institutions. As part of Senge's broader theory on learning organizations, it is noted that sustainable change requires leaders to move beyond isolated interventions and instead focus on system-wide collaboration, shared vision, and adaptive leadership.

Integrating the Core Disciplines for Leadership

Systems thinking, described by Senge (2006) as the *fifth discipline*, provides a framework for integrating the core disciplines—Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Shared Vision, and Team Learning—into a cohesive whole. Senge emphasizes, "But systems thinking also needs the disciplines of building shared vision, mental models, team learning, and personal mastery to realize its potential" (p. 16). This integration is essential for leading meaningful and sustainable change in education.

Personal Mastery highlights the importance of individuals cultivating their own learning journeys. Senge describes this discipline as a continuous process of clarifying and deepening one's vision, focusing energy, and objectively confronting reality. When personal growth aligns with organizational goals, then Personal Mastery can lead to a commitment to lifelong learning. Mental Models address the hidden assumptions and ingrained beliefs that shape individual and organizational behavior. Senge notes that unexamined mental models often hinder innovation and adaptability in educational settings, limiting leaders' ability to tackle systemic challenges. Shared Vision is another critical discipline, as it establishes a collective sense of purpose that unites and energizes an organization. Senge stresses that truly shared visions inspire commitment rather than mere compliance which enables leaders to connect their personal aspirations with the organization's goals (pp. 8-13).

Further, Team Learning focuses on the power of collective intelligence. It helps teams overcome defensive behaviors, align their efforts, and achieve transformative outcomes. As Senge (2006) explains, "Team Learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations" (p. 14). For this reason, Team Learning is a cornerstone of organizational growth. Through systems thinking, these disciplines are unified into a coherent approach for addressing complex challenges in education. Senge describes systems thinking as "a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing

interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots" (p. 74). This perspective is vital for addressing the dynamic and interconnected challenges facing basic education systems.

Feedback and System Dynamics. A key concept in systems thinking is the understanding of feedback loops, which illustrate how behaviors within a system influence outcomes over time. Senge identifies two types of feedback loops:

- Reinforcing positive loops: Amplify change and can lead to rapid growth or decline.

- Balancing negative loops: Counteract change and help maintain stability.

For example, reinforcing loops can explain how an innovative teaching practice gains momentum through positive word-of-mouth, while balancing loops may highlight how external pressures, such as resource constraints, slow progress. Senge explains, "The practice of systems thinking starts with understanding a simple concept called 'feedback' that shows how actions can reinforce or counteract (balance) each other" (p. 79). They further note, "In systems thinking, it is an axiom that every influence is both cause and effect. Nothing is ever influenced in just one direction" (p. 81). This understanding helps leaders anticipate unintended consequences and identify opportunities for meaningful intervention.

Leverage Points for Transformative Change. One of the most powerful tools in systems thinking is the identification of leverage points—specific areas within a system where small, focused actions can produce significant, lasting improvements. Senge writes, "Small, well-focused actions can sometimes produce significant, enduring improvements, if they're in the right place" (p. 69). In education, leverage points might include fostering inclusive leadership practices, shifting school cultures, or aligning teacher professional development with student needs. These targeted interventions can reshape systemic behaviors and lead to more equitable and effective educational outcomes.

Addressing Root Causes. Senge (2006) emphasizes that addressing root causes involves identifying the deeper systemic structures responsible for generating visible problems. He writes, "The interaction of the underlying system is most responsible for generating the symptoms, and which, if recognized, could lead to changes producing lasting improvement" (p. 74). Declining test scores or high teacher turnover, for instance, are often symptoms of deeper, systemic issues. Senge warns that focusing solely on short-term fixes leads to reactive solutions that fail to address the root causes of problems. Systems thinking encourages leaders to delve into the systemic structures and behavior patterns that drive recurring challenges in order to find sustainable solutions.

Navigating Unintended Consequences. Senge (2006) points out the critical importance of recognizing unintended consequences when designing interventions, and cautions against "shifting the burden," where short-term fixes lead to long-term challenges (pp. 116–119). For example, cutting staff to reduce costs may alleviate immediate financial strain but can result in reduced teacher morale, higher turnover rates, and poorer student outcomes over time. Senge reminds us that "cause and effect are not closely related in time and space" (p. 74), which shows the need for leaders to understand the long-term impacts of their decisions.

Shifting Mental Models in Education. Systems thinking requires leaders to confront and challenge their mental models—deeply ingrained assumptions and beliefs that shape their actions and decisions. As Senge (2006) asserts, "our mental models determine not only how we make sense of the world, but how we take action" (p. 189). In education, for example, assumptions about teacher effectiveness or student potential can reinforce inequities or hinder innovation. Exposing and challenging these mental models allows leaders to create more inclusive and adaptive approaches to addressing systemic challenges.

Understanding Delays in Systemic Change. Senge (2006) draws attention to delays within systems—intervals between actions and their consequences—which can obscure the connection between interventions and their outcomes, explaining that "delays between actions and consequences are everywhere in human systems" (p. 97), and that delays "can have a positive effect if you recognize them and work with them" (p. 96). In education, delays are common when implementing interventions such as new curricula or leadership training, as their full impact may take years to materialize. Recognizing and accounting for these delays helps leaders stay committed to long-term strategies rather than abandoning them prematurely.

Systems Archetypes Applicable in Education. Senge (2006) introduces systems archetypes—recurrent patterns of behavior that predictably lead to systemic problems. These archetypes, such as "Limits to Growth" (pp. 104-112), "Shifting the Burden" (pp. 112-122), and "Eroding Goals" ((pp. 417-418), "The Tragedy of the Commons" (pp. 420-422), and "Fixes that Fail" (pp. 422-423) among others, provide valuable tools for diagnosing and addressing challenges in education. For example, *Limits to Growth* may explain why a successful initiative, such as a new teaching methodology, eventually encounters diminishing returns when systemic constraints, such as inadequate training or resources, are not addressed. Recognizing these patterns helps leaders design interventions that break harmful cycles and foster sustainable growth.

A Shift in Perspective. At its core, systems thinking demands a shift in perspective—from seeing problems as isolated events to recognizing their interconnectedness within a larger system. Senge describes this transformation as "a shift of mind—from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience" (p. 16). Senge concludes that "the essence of the discipline of systems thinking

lies in a shift of mind: seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains, and seeing processes of change rather than snapshots" (p. 79). This mindset equips educational leaders with the tools to create learning organizations capable of thriving in complexity and delivering equitable outcomes for all students.

In essence, it is evident from Senge's (2006) framework that the application of systems thinking to educational leadership necessitates a paradigmatic shift from linear, reductionist problem-solving to a holistic, relational understanding of organizational dynamics. The integration of the core disciplines—Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Shared Vision, and Team Learning—facilitates a cohesive approach, enabling leaders to move beyond isolated interventions and cultivate a learning organization capable of sustained, systemic change. Central to this approach is the recognition of feedback loops, both reinforcing and balancing, which illuminate the interconnectedness of actions and outcomes, thereby enabling leaders to anticipate unintended consequences and strategically identify leverage points for transformative intervention. Furthermore, the emphasis on addressing root causes, rather than merely treating symptomatic manifestations, underscores the importance of delving into underlying systemic structures and behavioral patterns. The acknowledgment of delays within systems and the application of systems archetypes provide analytical tools for navigating the complexities of educational environments, fostering a proactive rather than reactive leadership stance. Ultimately, the adoption of systems thinking compels a fundamental shift in perspective, promoting an understanding of educational challenges as interconnected phenomena within a larger system, thereby equipping leaders with the capacity to cultivate equitable and sustainable outcomes for all stakeholders.

Alternative Frameworks for Consideration:

Apart from Senge's Systems Thinking (2006), there are other equally important frameworks I had considered suitable for analyzing the leadership challenges in Nigeria's

basic education. These frameworks, when combined, can provide a good pathway for school leaders. However, Senge's framework remains most suitable as it is arguably holistic and addresses the issues more systematically. Also, many other frameworks take a cue from Senge's Systems Thinking framework which makes it largely legitimate and relevant in analyzing whole system issues.

Social Justice Leadership. Brown (2004) argues that social justice leadership is crucial for educational equity, requiring leaders to adopt a transformative approach. This involves integrating critical reflection, open dialogue, and practical policy work into leadership training. Leaders must challenge their own biases and align their actions with their values. As Brown notes, "it makes sense for preparation programs to include approaches that enable participants to challenge their own assumptions, clarify and strengthen their own values, and work on aligning their own behaviors and practice with these beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies" (p. 81). Turhan (2010) emphasizes that social justice demands active intervention against institutionalized discrimination. Principals must dismantle inequities and guarantee fair access to opportunities and positive outcomes for all students. Neglecting this, Turhan warns, perpetuates societal imbalance (p. 1360). Flores and Bagwel (2021) echo this as they highlight the need for inclusive leadership that prioritizes race, class, gender, and disability, ensuring belonging and quality education for every student.

Connective Leadership. Lipman-Blumen (2017) offers a leadership framework suited to our interconnected world. It emphasizes building collaborative relationships across diverse groups to achieve shared goals. This "connective leadership" values inclusion, integrating varied perspectives and resources to tackle complex problems. The model incorporates three leadership styles: direct (driven and determined), relational (focused on interpersonal connections), and instrumental (leveraging networks). In today's complex environment, leaders must navigate cultural, organizational, and systemic influences.

Lipman-Blumen's model highlights the need for adaptive, empathetic, and network-oriented leadership to manage change and drive innovation.

The Coherence Framework. As outlined by Fullan and Kirtman (2019), this framework provides a structured yet adaptable approach to achieving meaningful and sustainable change in education by aligning leadership practices and organizational focus. It emphasizes four interconnected components: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability. These elements work interactively to ensure schools and districts maintain clear goals, foster trust and collaboration, support meaningful learning practices, and promote internal accountability. Fullan and Kirtman highlight that coherence is not about rigid compliance but about creating shared purpose and capacity across all levels of the organization, thereby enabling systemic well-being and sustainable improvement.

Culturally Responsive Leadership. Culturally responsive leadership (CRL), as synthesized by Khalifa et al. (2016), emphasizes the critical role of school leaders in creating inclusive, equitable, and affirming educational environments for minority students. CRL centers on four core strands: critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, inclusive school environments, and engagement with community contexts. Effective culturally responsive leaders actively reflect on their biases and assumptions to ensure their practices align with the needs of diverse student populations. They prioritize the development of culturally responsive teachers and curricula, promote a school climate that values the identities of minority students, and engage authentically with communities to bridge cultural gaps. Khalifa et al. assert that culturally responsive leaders must not only resist oppressive practices but also affirm and institutionalize the cultural strengths of marginalized students.

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In summation, while Senge's systems thinking framework provides a robust, holistic lens for exploring and analyzing systemic educational challenges, the complementary frameworks of social justice leadership, connective leadership, the coherence framework, and culturally responsive leadership offer critical, nuanced perspectives essential for creating equitable and sustainable educational environments. Social justice leadership, with its emphasis on challenging biases and dismantling institutionalized discrimination, ensures that equity remains at the forefront of educational reform. Connective leadership, by valuing diverse perspectives and cultivating collaborative relationships, addresses the complexities of interconnected educational systems. The coherence framework, through its focus on aligning organizational goals and fostering collaborative cultures, provides a structured pathway for achieving meaningful change. Finally, culturally responsive leadership emphasizes the necessity of creating inclusive and affirming environments for minority students by integrating critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricula, and community engagement. When these frameworks are considered in conjunction with Senge's systemic approach, school leaders are better equipped to navigate the multifaceted challenges inherent in creating transformative and equitable educational systems.

Justification For Using Senge's Systems Thinking Framework:

While frameworks like social justice leadership, connective leadership, the coherent framework, and culturally responsive leadership offer valuable perspectives on improving education, they may not fully address the interconnected nature of systemic issues like Senge's Systems Thinking" (2006) framework does. Therefore, Senge's model is the most appropriate for this paper. Systems thinking provides a structured approach to tackling deep-rooted challenges, moving beyond short-term fixes to promote long-term, scalable solutions. Furthermore, its emphasis on collaboration and equity aligns perfectly with the goals of creating a more just and effective education system. It is important to note, however, that the

other frameworks mentioned are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can be seen as integral components or specialized branches within the broader systems thinking framework, and as such, offer specific strategies and perspectives that contribute to a holistic understanding of educational improvement.

Literature Review

This section of the paper explores different literature on areas such as Basic Education in Nigeria, the challenges faced by educational leaders in Nigeria, the evolution of leadership theories and different perspectives on the topic of leadership, global approaches and practices in educational leadership, strategies for achieving meaningful and sustainable change in education, and application of the systems thinking approach to school leadership. The deliberate and intentional selection of the literature in this section is a clear indication of how leadership and education work hand-in-hand in a complimentary fashion.

Basic Education and Educational Leadership Challenges in Nigeria

Nigeria's basic education system faces a complex interplay of historical, policy, and practical challenges. Akanbi and Jekayinfa (2019) provide a valuable historical lens, tracing the evolution of education in Nigeria from 1914 to 2014 and highlighting how policies have shaped access and quality. Understanding this historical context is crucial for grasping the current state of basic education. On the ground, teachers grapple with the realities of implementing systemic changes, as explored by Babajide and Smith (2022). Their research reveals the difficulties teachers face adapting to new curricula and methodologies, underscoring the need for effective support during reform implementation. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy, a cornerstone of Nigeria's educational goals, is examined by Bolaji et al. (2016). Their analysis of UBE implementation highlights the persistent challenges in achieving universal access, improving quality, and addressing disparities. The National Policy on Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020) serves as the guiding

document, outlining the philosophy and objectives of the system. However, translating these policies into effective practice remains a significant hurdle.

Curriculum reform is a continuous process, and Igbokwe (2015) sheds light on recent efforts at the basic education level, focusing on the rationale and potential impact of these changes. The ongoing need for improvement is underscored by Odukoya et al. (2018), who call for urgent reforms to address the quality crisis in basic education. Their work identifies key obstacles and proposes targeted interventions. Demographic pressures, as discussed by Ofoegbu and Obiweluozor (2015), add another layer of complexity. Population growth and migration patterns pose significant challenges for planning, resource allocation, and ensuring equitable access to education. The difficulties of providing quality education in rural areas are highlighted by Olatunji and Ajayi (2016), who examine the link between rurality, massification policies, and teacher turnover. Attracting and retaining qualified teachers in rural communities is a persistent struggle. Opoh et al. (2015) advocate for a paradigm shift in the UBE program, arguing for a more forward-looking approach to prepare students for a globalized world.

Effective leadership is paramount in navigating these challenges. Adegbesan (2011) emphasizes the critical role of educational managers in establishing quality assurance mechanisms. Leadership is essential for fostering accountability and driving continuous improvement. Aje (2019) delves into the administrative responsibilities of school leaders and reveals the gap between expectations and the realities they face. Challenges related to resource management and staff supervision can hinder effective leadership. Lawan et al. (2020) focus on the broader administration of public educational institutions and identify key problems as well as offer recommendations. Governance, funding, and human resources are all critical areas requiring strong leadership. Udey et al. (2009) provide a comprehensive overview of the management and administration of the Nigerian education system as they

highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by leaders at all levels. From individual schools to the national level, effective leadership is essential for navigating the complex landscape of Nigerian basic education.

Leadership Theories and Their Evolution

According to McShane et al., many scholars agree that leadership fundamentally involves influencing, motivating, and enabling others to contribute to the effectiveness and success of the organizations to which they belong (2020, p. 317). A variety of leadership theories are explored by Northouse (2022), reflecting how the field has evolved over time to address different contexts and challenges. Early theories, such as the trait approach, emphasized the inherent qualities of leaders, suggesting that leadership traits are innate and distinguish leaders from non-leaders. This 'great man' perspective was prominent until the mid-20th century when researchers began questioning the universality of such traits and recognized the importance of situational contexts. The situational approach, which emerged subsequently, proposed that effective leadership requires adapting one's style to the competence and commitment of followers, acknowledging the dynamic interplay between leaders and their environments. Transformational leadership theory later added a focus on leaders' ability to inspire and motivate followers to transcend self-interest for the collective good, highlighting vision, charisma, and the role of ethical principles.

Further, drawing on insights from Northouse (2022), as the field of leadership matured, relational theories, such as leader-member exchange (LMX), shifted attention to the quality of interactions between leaders and followers. This approach conceptualized leadership as a series of dyadic relationships, recognizing the diverse nature of leader-follower exchanges and their impact on outcomes like job satisfaction and performance. The path-goal theory further expanded on this by integrating motivational principles, and emphasizes the leader's role in removing obstacles and clarifying paths to goals for followers.

The evolution of these theories shows a progression from viewing leadership as a static trait to a complex, dynamic process involving situational, relational, and ethical considerations. This nuanced understanding of leadership reflects broader societal and organizational changes, which illustrate the adaptability of leadership theories to contemporary challenges.

Dugan (2017) explores the evolving nature of leadership and places emphasis on its paradigmatic and socially constructed underpinnings. Dugan critiques the static, traditional views of leadership that often focus on individual traits or roles, instead advocating for a broader understanding rooted in social interaction and context. Dugan highlights how leadership is shaped by and reflective of societal norms, values, and paradigms, such as positivism, constructivism, and critical theory, each contributing unique perspectives on the concept. For instance, while positivism seeks universal truths about leadership, constructivism emphasizes the subjective experiences and cultural contexts that shape leadership interactions. Furthermore, Dugan (2017) stresses the importance of values in leadership, challenging notions of neutrality by arguing that even harmful leadership reflects particular values. This chapter invites readers to engage critically with leadership as it encourages them to recognize its interdisciplinary nature and the necessity of questioning entrenched paradigms to adapt to contemporary challenges (pp. 1–23).

Arar and Oplatka (2022) provide a comprehensive exploration of the evolution of educational leadership theories, tracing their development from early trait-based models to contemporary frameworks that emphasize inclusivity, collaboration, and social justice. Early leadership studies focused on individual traits and behaviors, progressing through contingency models that linked leadership styles to situational factors. Transformational leadership emerged in the 1980s, prioritizing intrinsic motivation, vision, and intellectual stimulation, while instructional leadership emphasized improving teaching and student outcomes through structured guidance. More recent models, such as shared and distributed

leadership, challenge traditional hierarchical structures by promoting collective responsibility and shared influence within organizations. Additionally, the chapter underscores the importance of leadership for social justice, advocating for practices that address equity, diversity, and inclusion within educational settings. This evolution reflects a shift from static, leader-centric approaches to dynamic, context-aware practices that align leadership with broader societal and organizational challenges (pp. 1–16).

Educational Leadership: Exploring Global Approaches and Practices

The field of educational leadership has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a focus on individual heroes to a more nuanced understanding of leadership as a distributed practice. Spillane (2004, 2015) has been a key figure in this evolution, redefining leadership as a collective endeavor woven into the interactions between leaders, followers, and their specific context. Spillane posits that leadership is not just about one person's actions, but rather emerges from the dynamic interplay of various actors, shaped by the tools, routines, and structures of their work environment. This 'practice-based perspective' emphasizes how tasks are distributed and shared within an organization, challenging traditional, top-down models and highlighting shared responsibility. This distributed perspective resonates with the work of Harris and DeFlaminis (2016), who explore distributed leadership in real-world settings, addressing common misunderstandings and examining its potential to promote collaboration and empower teachers.

Similarly, Liu et al. (2021) investigate the impact of both instructional and distributed leadership on teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction, acknowledging the importance of a supportive school culture and teacher collaboration. Of course, effective leadership also necessitates a strong focus on instruction. Hallinger (2005) discusses the enduring relevance of instructional leadership with an emphasis on the principal's role in establishing instructional goals, providing teacher support, and monitoring student progress. Özdemir et

al. (2024) reinforce this connection through their systematic review, linking school leadership to student achievement and identifying effective leadership practices. Beyond instructional leadership, other approaches are crucial for creating equitable and successful schools. Day et al. (2016) investigate the impact of transformational and instructional leadership on student outcomes while highlighting the importance of specific leadership behaviors.

Khalifa et al. (2016) synthesize the literature on culturally responsive school leadership as they explore how leaders can create inclusive environments that value and support students from diverse backgrounds. Grissom et al. (2021) provide a broad overview of principal effectiveness while synthesizing two decades of research to identify key leadership practices that contribute to school success. Gümüş et al. (2020) offer an international perspective which reviews research on school leadership for social justice, equity, and diversity. There is no doubt effective leadership also requires a clear and compelling vision with Mombourquette (2017) emphasizing the importance of a guiding vision in decision-making and inspiring stakeholders. Nebieridze (2023) explores innovative aspects of school leadership, considering emerging trends and new approaches to leading in a rapidly changing world, which clearly indicates how principals' life experiences and management styles deeply influence their schools' organizational culture and capacity for innovation.

Lambersky (2016) reminds us of the human side of leadership, examining its impact on teachers' morale, self-efficacy, stress, and commitment. Leithwood et al. (2019) revisit their influential claims about successful school leadership as they reaffirm the importance of setting direction, building relationships, and improving the instructional program, while also acknowledging the significance of external factors and distributed leadership. Several studies further illuminate specific facets of educational leadership. Acosta and Guthrie (2021) explore the leadership identity development of Latino men in higher education with an

emphasis on the influence of individual experiences and social identities on their leadership trajectories. Lozano (2024) underscores the pivotal role of school leadership in shaping educational outcomes, focusing on its significance as a key factor after teaching quality. Yalçın and Çoban's (2023) study highlights the impact of school leadership on student achievement through mediating factors like teacher collaboration and parental involvement.

Webster and Litchka (2020) connect school principals' leadership abilities with ethical behaviors, as perceived by teachers. DeWitt (2023) investigates the core attributes of exemplary school leaders with character, tasks, and relationships being identified as foundational to effectiveness. Klocko and Justis (2019) explore the unique stressors and leadership challenges encountered by rural school principals. Carter and Abawi (2018) examine leadership practices that foster inclusive education in diverse school contexts. Yeigh et al. (2019) explore the role of school leadership in driving school improvement through alignment, capability, and engagement. Huber and Pruitt (2024) evaluate a multi-faceted approach to school leadership development in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts.

Moreover, Tintoré et al. (2020) highlight the increasing complexities and demands faced by school leaders while pointing to the need for systemic support and enhanced leadership training. Their scoping review reveals the multitude of challenges facing principals, from managing complex roles and stakeholder interactions to navigating educational policies. They conclude with a call for greater support and preparation to equip school leaders for the multifaceted demands of their roles.

The evolution of educational leadership, as illuminated by this diverse body of literature, reveals a clear shift from singular, heroic models towards a nuanced understanding of leadership as a distributed and contextually embedded practice. Central to this transformation is the recognition that leadership emerges from the dynamic interplay of actors, tools, and structures within a given setting, emphasizing shared responsibility and

collaborative endeavors. While instructional leadership remains a cornerstone, with principals playing pivotal roles in establishing goals and supporting teachers, the literature underscores the necessity of integrating diverse leadership approaches to cultivate equitable and successful schools. Transformational, culturally responsive, and connective leadership models, alongside a focus on social justice and ethical practice, are essential for navigating the complexities of contemporary educational landscapes. Moreover, the significance of a clear, compelling vision, coupled with an understanding of the human dimensions of leadership—including teacher morale and well-being—is paramount. The research consistently highlights the need for robust leadership development programs that equip principals to address the multifaceted challenges they encounter, particularly in socioeconomically disadvantaged and diverse contexts. Ultimately, effective educational leadership necessitates a holistic approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of instructional, relational, and ethical dimensions, while fostering a culture of collaboration, inclusivity, and continuous improvement.

Meaningful and Sustainable Change in Education

Drawing from the insights gained through the Studies in Educational Leadership (SEL) program, this paper explores strategies for leading meaningful and sustainable change in Nigeria's public basic education sector. Conners et al. (2024) describe 'meaningful change' in the higher education context as a process centered on intentional, inclusive, and sustainable transformation that addresses systemic inequities while fostering a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility. This concept, as emphasized by Adrianna Kezar, requires designing change initiatives that prioritize equity, adaptability, and the active involvement of stakeholders to ensure long-term impact and relevance. Although the concept is originally used in the higher education context, it carries the same implication for all levels of education.

Prenger et al. (2022) define 'sustainable change' as the implementation of innovations that persist over time by aligning with organizational characteristics, innovation attributes, individual commitment, and the broader contextual environment. They highlight that lasting change depends on integrating these elements to address both immediate and long-term needs within educational systems. Similarly, Hays and Reinders (2020) emphasize sustainable change as the cultivation of sustainable learning and education (SLE), which focuses on developing curricula that equip learners with the skills and dispositions necessary to adapt to and thrive in dynamic, complex environments. This approach ensures that educational transformations remain meaningful, relevant, and sustainable over time.

Creating meaningful and sustainable change in education requires a shift away from quick-fix solutions and toward a systemic understanding of the challenges at hand. Fullan and Quinn (2016) highlights the importance of "coherence making" in combating the "overload, multiple initiatives, silos and compliance-oriented mandates" that often plague educational leadership. They argue that true coherence, a shared understanding of the work, must be cultivated through purposeful interaction and a focus on a common agenda. Their framework, encompassing focused direction, collaborative cultures, deepened learning, and capacity-based accountability, emphasizes the ongoing and cumulative nature of coherence building, requiring leaders to prioritize and manage innovation fatigue. This echoes Beehner's (2019) work on system leadership for sustainability, which, while focused on academia, emphasizes the need for systemic change that considers environmental, social, and economic factors, a perspective highly relevant to K-12 education.

Cohen and Mehta (2017) delve into the dynamics of successful and unsuccessful school reforms, offering valuable insights into how change can be effectively implemented. Their historical and systemic approach identifies key characteristics of successful reforms, including addressing educators' needs, providing actionable solutions, and aligning with

stakeholder values. They differentiate between system-wide and niche reforms, highlighting the importance of context and the need for both external pressures and internal capacity building. Hays and Reinders (2020) introduce the concept of Sustainable Learning and Education (SLE), emphasizing the development of self-sustaining, adaptable, and proactive learners. Their proposed curriculum, incorporating systems thinking, ecological awareness, and self-sufficiency, aims to equip individuals with the skills and dispositions needed to navigate a complex and ever-changing world.

The importance of leadership in driving educational change is further emphasized by Holmes et al. (2013), who studied principals involved in a sustainable school renewal project. Their research highlights the critical role of shared vision, relational trust, data-driven problem-solving, focus on core instruction, and responsiveness to community dynamics. They underscore the importance of collaborative leadership, open communication, and staff involvement. MacNeil et al. (2021) explore the shift from accountability to shared responsibility, highlighting the conditions that enable stakeholders to exercise professional responsibility. Their study emphasizes the foundational role of trust, aligned values, professional learning opportunities, and meaningful data use.

Mills and Niesche (2014) bring to light the emotional dimensions of school leadership, particularly during periods of reform. Their case study of a principal undergoing significant changes underscores the importance of emotionally engaged leadership, relational trust, and a focus on well-being. They also highlight the challenges faced by leaders who prioritize these values in the face of systemic pressures. In essence, Shaeffer (2019) emphasizes the crucial role of inclusive education in achieving equity and social justice. Shaeffer argues for a broad definition of inclusion that addresses all barriers to education and learning, calling for systemic reforms at both the school and national levels. Shaeffer's work

underscores the importance of creating learning environments where all children can reach their full potential.

In synthesizing the diverse perspectives on meaningful and sustainable change in education, it becomes evident that effective transformation transcends mere implementation of novel practices, demanding a systemic, holistic approach that prioritizes equity, collaboration, and long-term impact. The concept of meaningful change, as articulated by Conners et al. (2024), necessitates intentional, inclusive, and equitable initiatives, while sustainable change, as outlined by Prenger et al. (2022) and Hays and Reinders (2020), hinges on aligning innovations with organizational characteristics, individual commitment, and contextual realities. Central to this process is the cultivation of coherence, as emphasized by Fullan and Quinn (2016), which requires leaders to navigate the complexities of educational reform by fostering shared understanding and addressing systemic challenges, including innovation fatigue. The insights from Cohen and Mehta (2017) underscore the importance of context-sensitive reforms that address educators' needs and align with stakeholder values, while Holmes et al. (2013) highlight the critical role of leadership in driving sustainable change through shared vision, relational trust, and data-driven problem-solving. Moreover, the shift from accountability to shared responsibility, as explored by MacNeil et al. (2021), and the recognition of the emotional dimensions of leadership, as illuminated by Mills and Niesche (2014), emphasize the need for cultivating supportive, trust-based environments. Consequently, the pursuit of meaningful and sustainable change in education necessitates a commitment to inclusive practices, as advocated by Shaeffer (2019), ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to thrive within equitable and supportive educational systems.

Applying the Systems Thinking Approach to School Leadership

Hopkins (2008) defines system leadership as an approach that extends beyond the confines of individual schools, demonstrating the role of leaders in contributing to the success of the broader education system. System leaders, according to Hopkins, are committed to improving teaching and learning, fostering equity, and addressing broader educational challenges. They operate across three core domains: managing teaching and learning processes, developing people, and strengthening organizational structures, all while prioritizing equity and inclusion. Central to system leadership is its moral purpose, which Hopkins describes as striving to "raise the bar and narrow the gap" (p. 25) in student achievement, ensuring that all students have access to high-quality education. Drawing on adaptive leadership strategies, Hopkins shows the need for leaders to address systemic challenges that go beyond technical solutions and as such advocates for collaboration, capacity-building, and segmentation to create an interconnected and supportive network of schools. Hopkins' perspective aligns with Senge's (2006) systems thinking framework, which emphasizes the interdependence of components within a system and the need for leaders to work collaboratively to achieve shared goals.

Similarly, Pont and Hopkins (2008) provide an in-depth analysis of system leadership by examining its implementation, benefits, and challenges in various educational contexts. They describe system leadership as a new role for school leaders that transcends individual school success, and advances collaboration and improvement across the entire education system. Drawing on international case studies from Finland, England, and Austria, they highlight the benefits of practices such as resource sharing, leadership development programs, and inter-school collaboration, which build leadership capacity and drive sustainable school improvement. However, they also acknowledge challenges such as sustaining these efforts, addressing competitive pressures, and ensuring appropriate training

and support for leaders. Consistent with Senge's (2006) framework, Pont and Hopkins emphasize the importance of building a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and collaboration to achieve systemic goals. Sustainability, they argue, depends on building in-school capacity, cultivating stakeholder trust, and aligning leadership practices with systemic objectives to balance the immediate needs of schools with long-term improvement efforts for equitable student outcomes.

The application of a systems thinking approach to school leadership, as articulated by Hopkins (2008) and Pont and Hopkins (2008), presents a compelling framework for addressing the complexities of educational reform, particularly within the context of Nigeria's basic education system. This perspective extends beyond individual school improvement, advocating for a systemic view that prioritizes collaboration, equity, and the collective advancement of educational outcomes. Aligning with Senge's (2006) principles enables system leadership to emphasize the interconnectedness of educational components, urging leaders to operate across domains of teaching and learning, personnel development, and organizational structures with a focus on narrowing achievement gaps. The imperative to 'raise the bar and narrow the gap,' as Hopkins articulates, indicates a moral purpose that resonates deeply with the pursuit of meaningful and sustainable change in Nigeria. Further, the international case studies provided by Pont and Hopkins illuminate the efficacy of resource sharing, leadership development, and inter-school collaboration in fostering systemic improvement, while acknowledging the challenges of sustainability and competitive pressures. In addressing the research question, 'How can school leaders advance meaningful and sustainable change in Nigeria's basic education system while balancing their administrative responsibilities with their instructional leadership roles?' the literature underscores the necessity for Nigerian school leaders to adopt a systems-oriented approach that integrates their administrative and instructional duties within a broader, collaborative

network. This entails cultivating a culture of trust and shared responsibility, building in-school capacity, and aligning leadership practices with systemic objectives, thereby ensuring that immediate school needs are balanced with long-term, equitable improvements across the entire basic education system.

Findings and Conclusions

This paper sought to explore how school leaders can advance meaningful and sustainable change in Nigeria's basic education system while balancing their administrative and instructional leadership roles. In addressing the first sub-question, regarding leadership strategies to improve teaching quality, enhance student outcomes, and promote collaboration, the literature emphasizes the necessity of distributed leadership (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Liu et al., 2021; Spillane, 2006) and instructional leadership (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2005; Özdemir et al., 2024). These approaches, when effectively implemented, empower teachers and foster a collaborative environment conducive to improved teaching practices and enhanced student achievement. Additionally, the integration of social justice leadership principles (Arar & Oplatka, 2022; Brown, 2004; Flores & Bagwell, 2021; Gümüş et al., 2020; Turhan, 2010) ensures that equity and inclusion are central to educational practices, particularly within Nigeria's diverse educational landscape.

Regarding the second sub-question, concerning the empowerment of teachers, students, and communities in diverse and resource-constrained settings, the literature highlights the importance of building strong relationships and fostering trust within the school community (DeWitt, 2023; Grissom et al., 2021; Huber & Pruitt, 2024; Leithwood et al., 2019; Nebieridze, 2023; Webster & Litchka, 2020; Yeigh et al., 2019). Effective leaders act as mentors and advocates, creating supportive learning environments that address the unique challenges posed by resource scarcity. Furthermore, strategies such as coherence making (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), building shared vision and relational trust (Holmes et al.,

2013), and promoting shared responsibility (Mills & Niesche, 2014) are crucial for engaging stakeholders and ensuring that reforms are embraced by the community.

Finally, in response to the third sub-question regarding the application of systems thinking to address systemic challenges and create sustainable change, the literature strongly advocates for a shift towards a holistic, interconnected perspective (Beehner, 2019; Hopkins, 2008; Pont & Hopkins, 2008). Recognizing the interdependence of various components within the education system allows leaders to move beyond isolated interventions and develop comprehensive, long-term solutions. By addressing root causes rather than merely treating symptoms, school leaders can effectively navigate the complex challenges within Nigeria's basic education system. The persistent struggle to translate policy into practice (Bolaji et al., 2016; Federal Ministry of Education, 2020; Igbokwe, 2015; Odukoya et al., 2018; Opoh et al., 2015) indicates the necessity for a systemic approach that considers the interplay of historical context, policy frameworks, and socioeconomic factors (Akanbi & Jekayinfa, 2019; Ofoegbu & Obiweluozor, 2015; Olatunji & Ajayi, 2016). In essence, the adoption of systems thinking, combined with effective leadership strategies, empowers school leaders to navigate their dual roles and drive meaningful, sustainable change in Nigeria's basic education system.

To meaningfully and sustainably transform Nigeria's basic education system, school leaders must adopt a profoundly intentional, inclusive, and systemic approach. Viewing challenges as opportunities for systemic improvement, leaders should embody a vision-driven, strategy-guided, and collaboratively sustained model. This necessitates a long-term commitment, continuous learning from communities, and a willingness to reimagine educational possibilities, thereby promoting a more equitable and just society. Demonstrating this intentionality requires active engagement with the strategies discussed in this paper.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This paper contributes to the field of educational leadership by demonstrating the efficacy of Senge's Systems Thinking framework in addressing the complexities of Nigeria's basic education system, particularly in relation to the challenge of balancing administrative and instructional leadership roles. By framing schools as interconnected ecosystems, this paper moves beyond traditional, isolated interventions, advocating for a holistic approach that recognizes the interdependence of various factors influencing educational outcomes. This perspective offers a lens for scholars seeking to develop leadership models tailored to resource-constrained and socio-economically diverse contexts, where the interplay between administrative demands and instructional leadership is acutely felt.

Additionally, this study invites further theoretical exploration into the synergistic integration of Systems Thinking with other relevant frameworks, such as social justice leadership, culturally responsive leadership, connective leadership, and the coherence framework, to create comprehensive, sustainable solutions for improving educational leadership practices in Nigeria. Specifically, future research should investigate how these integrated frameworks can be adapted and implemented at the grassroots level, and how culturally responsive leadership practices can yield long-term benefits for student outcomes and community trust.

For practitioners, this research underscores the need to adopt leadership practices that are both strategic and contextually relevant. School leaders in Nigeria must navigate the dual demands of administrative oversight and instructional leadership while driving transformative change within their schools. The practical implications of this paper include the encouragement of continuous reflection and adaptive planning, enabling leaders to align their strategies with school goals and community needs. Leaders are urged to build robust collaborative networks with teachers, parents, and local stakeholders, fostering a culture of

collective accountability and shared vision. This collaborative approach not only enhances the likelihood of sustained school improvement but also facilitates a more effective balance between administrative and instructional responsibilities. With emphasis on adaptability, collaboration, and long-term thinking, this paper provides school leaders with a practical framework for responding to systemic challenges and implementing change strategies that promote meaningful and sustainable improvements in Nigeria's basic education system.

Senge's Systems Thinking in Action: The Nigerian Context

The Place of Personal Mastery. For school leaders, personal mastery means committing to their own professional growth. This includes staying abreast of current educational research, developing their leadership skills, and reflecting on their own practices. It also involves fostering a culture of personal mastery among teachers, encouraging them to pursue professional development opportunities and create a classroom environment where students are encouraged to learn and grow. Leaders demonstrating personal mastery inspire others and create a culture of continuous improvement within the school.

Applying Mental Models. School leaders need to become aware of their own mental models about teaching, learning, leadership, and the Nigerian education system. For example, a principal who believes that "students from poor backgrounds are less likely to succeed" might unintentionally create a self-fulfilling prophecy. By reflecting on their mental models and challenging limiting assumptions, leaders can create more inclusive and equitable learning environments. They can also help teachers become aware of their own mental models about students and create a more positive and supportive school culture.

Shared Vision in School Leadership. Nigerian school leaders need a clear and inspiring shared vision that articulates the desired future for their students and the community. This vision should be developed collaboratively with teachers, parents, students, and community members, ensuring buy-in and ownership. A shared vision can provide a

unifying focus for school improvement efforts, guiding decision-making and resource allocation. For example, a shared vision might focus on developing students who are not only academically proficient but also equipped with the skills and values needed to succeed in the 21st century.

Team Learning as a Strategy. School leaders can foster team learning by creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate, share ideas, and learn from each other. This can be done through professional learning communities, collaborative lesson planning, and joint problem-solving activities. Team learning can help teachers develop new skills, improve their teaching practices, and create a more supportive and collaborative work environment. It also allows schools to leverage the collective intelligence of their staff to address complex challenges and improve student outcomes.

Activating Systems Thinking. Nigerian school leaders can use systems thinking to analyze the complex challenges facing basic education. For example, instead of viewing poor student performance as solely a teacher issue, a systems perspective would consider the interplay of factors such as teacher training, resource availability, parental involvement, community support, curriculum design, and policy environment. This holistic view allows leaders to identify root causes and develop more effective, systemic solutions. It also encourages them to anticipate unintended consequences of interventions. For instance, simply increasing funding without addressing teacher motivation and capacity might not lead to improved learning outcomes.

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