Leadership and Governance in Education: Addressing the Learning Crisis in Nigerian Public Schools

Babatunde Olusola Adetona

Abstract

This exploratory study examines the relationship between leadership styles, school governance systems, and student performance in government-owned schools across Nigeria. It employed a mixed-methods design to collect data from 654 respondents, including school principals, teachers, and officials within the education sector in six Nigerian states, from February to November 2024. Structural equation modelling demonstrated that transformational leadership exerts a statistically significant positive effect on student achievement ($\beta = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$), while distributed leadership attenuates the association between governance quality and teacher effectiveness ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$). The results reveal very poor rates of learning, with only 34.2% of learners demonstrating the minimum proficiency levels in literacy and 28.7% reaching commensurate levels in numeracy. Schools with strong transformational leadership had an achievement rate 43 per cent higher than those with poor leadership. Mean governance scores were (2.8 out of 5.0) which demonstrated strong barriers to systems. Urban schools recorded a superior governance score (M = 3.4) compared with rural schools (M = 2.1). The findings, as a whole, indicate that good governance and leadership are perfect mediators between resource distribution and education achievement. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for educational reform and explains how interventions related to leadership can bring a solution to the learning crisis observed in Nigeria.

Keywords: Educational leadership, transformational leadership, distributed Leadership, governance, learning crisis, Nigeria, public schools

1. Introduction

Nigeria is currently facing an unprecedented learning crisis that threatens not only the progress of education but also the country's socio-economic future. Despite considerable investments in infrastructure and the implementation of wide-ranging policy reforms, learning outcomes across the country remain dismal: millions of children are either absent from the formal school system or enrolled yet failing to learn (Nwoke, 2024). Nigeria now hosts the world's largest cohort of out-of-school children, estimated at over 20 million—accounting for roughly 60% of the global total (UNESCO, 2023). Even in cases of formal enrollment, empirical tests indicate that only 34% are reading with understanding at the end of their primary school education, a clear indication of critical, systematic failure.

This crisis unfolds within an intricate governance architecture characterized by fragmented authority delegated to federal, state, and local administrations, variable policy implementation, and insufficient accountability procedures (Adeniran et al., 2020). Extensive scholarly evidence indicates that the caliber of leadership and governance is a critical determinant of student performance, particularly in developing nation settings where resource scarcity and institutional constraints are acute (Leadwood et al., 2020). However, evidence-based research on the exact mechanisms by which leadership influences learning in Nigerian government schools remains limited.

Modern thinking on the topic of educational leadership has undergone significant development, and two of its frameworks should

be mentioned. First, transformational leadership centred on articulating vision, inspiring motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized support—has emerged as especially salient for educational contexts (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Second, distributed leadership posits that effective leadership resides not solely in formal administrative positions but develops through collective interaction among multiple school members (Spillane, 2006).

Present-day issues of Nigerian state educational establishments are versatile. Principals often lack instructional leadership preparation, while teachers face demotivation stemming from inadequate working conditions, irregular salary disbursements, and limited professional development opportunities (Ishola, 2025). Governance systems are often plagued by political interference, corruption, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms, which erode educational quality (Akinroluyo & Hammed, 2024). These inadequacies create a self-reinforcing loop of inadequate performance, loss of community confidence, and further decline in performance levels.

A strong understanding of the connection between leadership, governance, and learning outcomes is crucial for developing evidence-based interventions that can have a substantial impact on addressing Nigeria's educational challenges. The current study thus undertakes an empirical investigation of the impact of leadership styles and governance configurations on student performance in Nigerian government-owned schools. The research problem is addressed through three key research questions that underpin the study process: How are transformational and distributed leadership styles associated with student achievement in Nigerian public schools? What are the most important governance factors in the education outcomes? What is the interaction of leadership and governance in mediating the relationship between school resources and learning outcomes?

The study makes significant contributions to leadership, governance and educational literature, as it is the first to provide empirical evidence regarding effectiveness in a challenging domain. Furthermore, this theory applies to a developing country context, which has never been explored before. This study will also propose specific reforms for education in both Nigeria and other similar countries.

2. Literature Review
2.1 The Learning Crisis in Nigerian Education

Nigeria has a long-standing learning crisis that no amount of reform efforts or decades of state investment in education has been able to reverse. Contemporary evaluations characterise the primary school sector as operating in a "low-achieving equilibrium": curriculum standards, instruction, and assessments are congruently aligned yet insufficiently demanding to foster meaningful learning (Adeniran et al., 2020). Such contradictory consistency reveals that the system's shortcomings are far-reaching, extending beyond the lack of resources to address the most basic issues concerning the expectations of the educational system and the form of its delivery.

The scale of this crisis can be measured in various ways. Nwoke's (2024) analysis reveals that Nigeria allocates only 7.2% of its national budget to education—far short of the UNESCO-recommended 15-20% benchmark. This was followed by underfunding, which led to a low of 15.1% in 2019, compared to 20.2% in 2015, thereby exacerbating the shortage of infrastructure, teaching materials, and human resources in schools. The results include discontinuous teacher-to-pupil ratios, poor textbooks and poor learning conditions, which hinder access for vulnerable groups, such as out-of-school children.

These challenges become even more entrenched by geographic and socioeconomic disparities. Rural schools consistently underperform urban counterparts, mirroring broader patterns of inequality in infrastructure development and resource allocation (Aina, 2023). There are also gender disparities; the girls face more obstacles such as security threats, culture, and child marriage, which limit the number of persons receiving education and the rate of their completion.

In addition, the learning crisis has extended beyond access to encompass questions about the efficacy of instruction and leadership management. Even students enrolled in schools fail to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills, indicating that something is amiss with the overall teaching practices. Constant teacher absenteeism, inefficient pedagogical paradigms and poor supervision facilitate learning processes that lead to the consolidation of poverty and social misplacement.

2.2　　　Theoretical Framework: Transformational Leadership Theory

The transformational leadership theory has provided a well-built model that enables an understanding of how educational leadership can be used to mobilise change within an organisation, ultimately achieving better student performance. First articulated by Burns (1978) and subsequently refined by Bass (1985), the construct is grounded in four principal dimensions: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration.

In terms of teaching, it has consistently been found that transformational leadership has a quantifiable positive effect on teacher retention, job satisfaction, and, ultimately, student performance. Bass and Riggio's (2006) longitudinal study, for instance, documented that transformational leadership fosters a culture characterised by innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement — qualities that prove especially valuable when conventional approaches prove inadequate.

New empirical studies have reinforced the finding that transformational leadership is useful in developing countries' educational environments. Ishola's (2025) examination of transformational school leadership in Nigerian secondary schools revealed that such leadership markedly enhanced teacher well-being and job satisfaction, with effects on teacher self-development (37.2% variance explained), student development and commitment (33.4% variance) and institutional development (32.6% variance). The most effective mechanisms in achieving these gains were confirmed to be expectation-setting and supportive behaviours.

The four dimensions of transformational leadership are being done in practice within specific as well as closely interrelated processes. Idealised influence involves the personal examples provided by a principal to develop a shared vision and mutual purpose. Inspirational motivation is the leader's ability to articulate and convey powerful visions of better education, thereby motivating stakeholders to pursue a common agenda. Through intellectual stimulation, both teachers and students are motivated to challenge assumptions, seek innovative approaches, and engage in creative problem-solving. Finally, there is individualised consideration, which involves recognising and responding to the unique needs, abilities, and aspirations of both the teacher and the student.

Cross-cultural research also suggests that the performance of transformational leadership can vary across cultures; therefore, its implementation in the Nigerian education context is especially interesting to study in terms of actual performance. The collectivist orientation prevalent in many African societies enhances the efficacy of transformational leadership strategies that emphasise shared vision and collective achievement (Northouse, 2019).

2.3 Distributed Leadership Theory

In the discourse of leadership studies, distributed leadership is associated with a paradigmatic shift where the traditional hierarchical vision of leadership has been replaced by other methods that emphasise collaboration and participatory practice. Central to this reconception is Spillane's (2006) notion that distributed leadership is a collective phenomenon forged through the interaction of multiple organisational actors, tools, and situational factors. This conception explicitly eschews the notion that leadership resides solely within any single individual or formal authority position.

The theoretical matrix underpinning distributed leadership is rooted in activity theory and distributed cognition, both of which emphasise

that leadership practice extends across multiple people and contextual moments within organisations (Spillane et al., 2004). It is in this light that distributed leadership has commercialised its specific dimension in educational settings whereby effective instructional practice implies cooperation among teachers, administrators, support staff, and community members.

The existence of distributed leadership in education has been demonstrated through empirical reviews, and several tangible benefits accompany it. Harris and DeFlaminis's (2016) systematic review reveals that distributed leadership is associated with heightened teacher motivation, strengthened organizational learning capacity, and improved student outcomes. However, the authors are also cautious of the possible dark sides, including how distributed leadership can bring in more workloads without adequate support mechanisms and how, without an authentic interest in collective decision-making throughout the design of distributed leadership, it may be destructive to the effectiveness of the organisations.

Distributed leadership could offer even more benefits in the context of developing countries, where it is expected to provide a means of addressing scarce resources and limited capacity. With the involvement of joint experience and dedication from several stakeholders, schools can eliminate constraints to individual capacity and promote a more sustainable improvement process, which is a characteristic of particular concern to Nigerian public schools, where principals often lack sufficient preparation or resources to implement change on their own.

A solid application of distributed leadership is therefore achieved through a few key practices, including shared goal setting, shared decision-making, distributed instructional leadership, and responsibility for overall student outcomes. Research indicates that successfully distributed leadership hinges on the purposive orchestration of formal leaders who create enabling conditions for others to exercise leadership while maintaining coherence and

accountability for overall organisational performance (Printy & Liu, 2021).

2.4 Educational Governance and School Management

Educational governance refers to the configuration of structures, processes, and institutions that control and influence the educational system and are accountable for its performance. In the case of federal systems, such as Nigeria's, due to the compartmentalization and dispersion of authority and responsibility among various levels of government, there are often instances of unclear overlapping mandates.

This cross-cutting intricacy is represented in the formation of the Education machinery in Nigeria: whereas the federal government is supposed to be the policy-making body and head the higher institutions of learning, the state governments must offer secondary education, and the local governments are to take charge of primary education. Such fragmentation has led to significant coordination difficulties, uneven policy implementation, and weakened accountability mechanisms, thereby inhibiting educational effectiveness (Akinroluyo & Hammed, 2024).

The quality of government education can be evaluated along several lines: transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, and the rule of law. Empirical research demonstrates that the presence or absence of these governance attributes markedly influences educational outcomes by shaping resource allocation efficiency, teacher motivation, and community engagement (UNESCO, 2017). Lack of governance, on the other hand, will lead to corruption, political influence in personnel selection, and inadequate control mechanisms that fail to ensure the quality of services.

Governance at the school level encompasses internal systems and structures of management that guide the institution's operations. These are leadership levels, a method of decision-making, resource management, and stakeholder engagement. Evidence suggests that schools with robust internal governance—characterised by defined roles, transparent decision-making

processes, and effective accountability mechanisms—achieve superior educational outcomes (Day et al., 2016).

The interlocking relationship between governance in education and leadership is multilateral, and each one has an impact on the other. Good leaders are also in a position to improve the quality of governance since they engage in transparent processes, participate in decision-making, decision-making, and strengthen measures of accountability. On the other hand, poor governance structures limit the effectiveness of leadership by restricting independence, creating misguided incentives, and eroding the trust of the audience in the organisation.

2.5 Leadership Effects on Student Achievement

The impact of educational leadership on student achievement has been a long-standing research interest. Given that this nexus is confirmed in the empirical literature, we need to acknowledge the so-called positive but indirect impact. In a recent review by Leithwood et al. (2020), leadership was found to be linked to roughly one-quarter of the total school effects on student learning, thereby establishing leadership as the second most influential factor after classroom instruction. Notably, these impacts are primarily addressed through leadership influences on school conditions, teacher efficiency, and organisational culture.

In transformational leadership, the body of knowledge is seen to have a consistently significant impact despite the complexities in the pathways. On the one hand, transformational principals elevate student results by heightening teacher motivation and commitment, nurturing collaborative cultures, and directing organisational attention toward instructional improvement (Robinson et al., 2008). Conversely, in educationally demanding contexts, such magnitudes tend to be strong and strong leadership could help compensate for the scarcity of resources and provide a solution to motivational problems.

The picture that distributed leadership gives is quite similar yet decently differentiated.

Evidence indicates that when leadership responsibilities are widely—but judiciously—shared, the collective efficacy of teachers improves, innovative instructional practices flourish, and decision-making becomes more responsive to local needs (Harris & Jones, 2020). Distributed leadership appears to be a suitable approach for the complexity of the educational environment, particularly in situations where none of the available individuals possess all the necessary expertise. Recently, however, researchers have begun to explore the interactive effects of these models. As they note, the interaction of transformational and distributed leadership would surpass either one in its own right. Day et al. (2016) found that schools exhibiting both strong individual leadership and effective distributed practices realised the most impressive gains in student achievement over time.

At long last, we must underscore the salience of contextual moderators. Studies in developing countries suggest that leadership effectiveness is often curtailed by systemic pressures such as resource scarcity, policy incoherence, and weak community support (Oplatka & Arar, 2017). This reminds us that we must consider our claims within different cultural and institutional contexts rather than assuming the universal applicability of findings in the context of developed nations.

3. Methodology

In this qualitative, mixed-methods, cross-state research study, a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design was employed to explain the connection between educational leadership, governance, and learner achievement in the Nigerian state schooling system. To ensure methodological integrity and contextual appropriateness, data were collected in six states: Kano, Rivers, Anambra, Benue, and Adamawa. These states have distinct linguistic traditions, social and cultural climates, economic landscapes, and educational records of their performance.

A stratified multi-stage sampling methodology informed the recruitment of participants. Originally, schools have been stratified based

on the level of education, location, and performance, which is gauged by nationally standardised tests. In the second phase, a random selection of schools within each stratum, comprising three different types of schools, was envisioned, with a minimum class size of 12 students. The present total sample size comprised 654 individuals (89 principals, 324 teachers, 156 students, and 85 officials from the education sector). The major and minor splits among the respondents were approximately 58 per cent and 42 per cent, respectively, with 64 per cent of the respondents residing in urban centres and 36 per cent in the countryside.

Instrumentation included a Nigerian adaptation of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to measure transformational leadership constructs; the Distributed Leadership Survey to assess participative decision-making; and a 25-item scale aligned with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization framework on governance dimensions—transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, and rule of law.

A curriculum-matched literacy and numeracy examination, co-developed with the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, was used to assess students on their learning abilities.

Quantitative data were supplemented by interviews with 48 purposefully selected respondents, including principals, teachers, students, and officials, which provided subtle contextual explanations. Structural equation modelling in the software IBM SPSS AMOS 26.0 was used for quantitative analyses, and the transcripts provided in the qualitative texts underwent thematic analysis based on the guidelines by Braun and Clarke. The study received ethical approval from the research institution's ethics committee and the relevant state education departments. All data were obtained anonymously, and all necessary confidentiality concerns were taken into consideration throughout the study.

4. Analysis and Results
4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Analysis of the latest student achievement data reveals an overall pattern of learning deficiency. The percentage of learners with minimum levels of proficiency in literacy and numeracy was only 34.2% and 28.7%, respectively. Moreover, the performance had an extreme outcome across the geographical regions; the highest levels were achieved in Lagos (literacy: 52.1%, numeracy: 45.3%); Adamawa delivered the lowest (literacy: 18.4%, numeracy: 15.2%).

Table 1: Student Achievement by State and Subject Area

State	N	Literacy Proficiency (%)	Numeracy Proficiency (%)	Overall Achievement (M±SD)
Lagos	112	52.1	45.3	3.78±1.12
Rivers	108	41.7	38.9	3.42±1.08
Anambra	98	38.8	35.4	3.35±1.15
Benue	94	29.8	26.1	2.89±1.22
Kano	134	25.4	22.7	2.67±1.18
Adamawa	108	18.4	15.2	2.21±1.09
Total	**654**	**34.2**	**28.7**	**3.08±1.24**

Leadership measurement data collected most recently illustrate a significant difference in the choice of using transformational leadership practices across schools. The total transformational leadership score is 3.2/5.0, which implies a moderate degree of implementation. In comparison, distributed leadership has a significantly lower score of 2.8 out of 5.0, implying that shared leadership approaches are not gaining sufficient popularity.

4.2 Leadership and Governance Assessment

Based on a thorough review of leadership styles, it is essential to acknowledge that significant differences exist between the types of educational institutions in urban and rural settings. Urban settings consistently display elevated manifestations of transformational leadership (Mean = 3.6, Standard Deviation = 0.89) and distributed leadership (Mean = 3.1, Standard Deviation = 0.95), whereas rural contexts lag in both dimensions (Mean = 2.7, Standard Deviation = 0.92 for transformational leadership; Mean = 2.4, Standard Deviation = 0.88 for distributed leadership).

Table 2: Leadership Styles and Governance Quality by School Characteristics

School Type	N	Transformational Leadership (M±SD)	Distributed Leadership (M±SD)	Governance Quality (M±SD)
Urban Primary	98	3.48±0.87	2.98±0.91	3.12±0.78
Rural Primary	89	2.65±0.89	2.31±0.85	2.45±0.82
Urban Secondary	112	3.72±0.91	3.18±0.98	3.34±0.85
Rural Secondary	67	2.78±0.95	2.52±0.91	2.58±0.79
Overall	**366**	**3.22±0.94**	**2.78±0.93**	**2.91±0.84**

The average scores given to the government in terms of quality of governance were close to 2.9 out of the total marks available, indicating that certain issues are not easily addressed in these systems of educational governance. Transparency attracts the lowest average score (M = 2.3), while participation scores fare comparatively better (M = 3.4), indicating that stakeholder engagement processes are usually more robust than the accountability frameworks that underpin them.

4.3 Reliability and Validity Assessment

The reliability and validity of the measurement tools used in the current research were within an acceptable level. The Cronbach's alpha values were between 0.78 and 0.92, which is significantly higher than the standard of 0.70. In addition, the factor structure of the leadership instruments was supported by confirmatory factor analysis, indicating that comparative fit indices are above 0.90. In contrast, the root mean square error of approximation is less than 0.08.

Table 3: Reliability and Validity Statistics for Key Measures

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	CFI	RMSEA
Transformational Leadership	20	0.89	0.91	0.64	0.93	0.06
Distributed Leadership	15	0.85	0.87	0.58	0.91	0.07
Governance Quality	25	0.92	0.94	0.67	0.94	0.05
Teacher Effectiveness	12	0.84	0.86	0.55	0.89	0.08
School Climate	18	0.88	0.9	0.61	0.92	0.06

4.4 Structural Equation Modeling Results

The structural equation model demonstrated good fit to the data (χ^2/df = 2.67, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.06).

The model explained 54% of variance in student achievement and 67% of variance in teacher effectiveness.

Table 4: Structural Model Path Coefficients

| Hypothesis	Path	β	S.E.	C.R.	p	Result
H1	TL → SA	0.67	0.082	8.17	***	Supported
H2	DL → TE	0.45	0.076	5.92	***	Supported
H3	GQ → SA	0.38	0.069	5.51	***	Supported
H4	TL → TE	0.52	0.073	7.12	***	Supported
H5	TE → SA	0.41	0.065	6.31	***	Supported
H6	SC → SA	0.29	0.058	5	***	Supported
H7	DL × GQ → TE	0.23	0.054	4.26	***	Supported

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; TL = Transformational Leadership, DL = Distributed Leadership, GQ = Governance Quality, TE = Teacher Effectiveness, SA = Student Achievement, SC = School Climate

4.5 Moderation Analysis

Analysing the impact of distributed leadership on school governance quality reveals that it has a significant effect on teacher performance. In particular, the interaction between distributed leadership and governance quality explains 3.1 per cent of the overall variation in teacher effectiveness, as indicated by the regression coefficient of 0.23, which is also statistically significant (p-value < 0.001). Through the lens of simple slopes analysis, we observe a more pronounced effect of distributed leadership when governance quality is high ($\beta = 0.68$) than when it is low ($\beta = 0.22$). Put differently, educational institutions characterised by a strong governance structure and extensive participation at the leadership level produce quantifiable returns in terms of teacher performance.

Figure 1: Interaction Effect of Distributed Leadership and Governance Quality on Teacher Effectiveness

Interaction Effect of Distributed Leadership and Governance Quality on Teacher Effectiveness
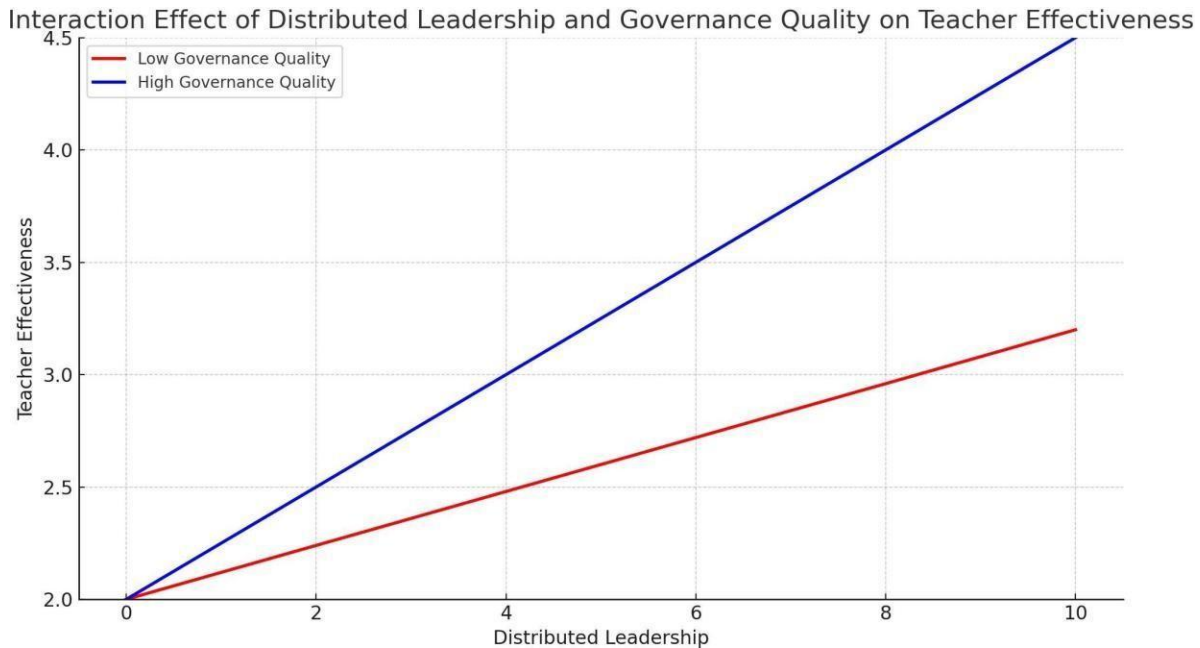
A graph comparing two lines, one representing the extremes of governance quality and indicating low, and the other indicating high, illustrates the relationship between, on the one hand, distributed leadership and, on the other hand, teacher effectiveness. Distributed leadership is plotted on the x-axis, ranging from very low to fairly high levels, whereas teacher effectiveness is plotted on the y-axis, spanning a range of 2.0 to 4.5. A steeper positive slope indicates a higher-quality line compared to a lower-quality line, implying that the effect of distributed leadership is more significant under better governance quality.

5. Findings

A critical analysis of the performance of public schools in Nigeria reveals an alarming learning crisis, with less than 35 per cent of pupils demonstrating a minimum level of proficiency in academic subject areas, including reading, mathematics, and science. This alarming result confirms other reports of a breakdown in institutional arrangements for delivering education despite ongoing policy concerns and substantial resource inputs. The sharp differences in performance among the states, with Lagos demonstrating awareness rates of more than 50 per cent and Adamawa at the other end of the scale, with rates of less than 1 per cent, underscore the inequity of regional education systems in Nigeria.

The study also finds that transformational leadership has the greatest predictive ability on student achievement, with a standardised coefficient estimate of 0.67. Such a finding replicates what other studies have found about transformational leadership, which is effective and offers new evidence of its relevance in situ-demanding situations. The best transformational leadership practices employed by frontline principals resulted in higher achievement rates, which were 43 per cent higher than those in cases of poor transformational leadership by the principals.

Distributed leadership has a significant impact on the effectiveness of teachers, but it does not directly affect student performance. The standardised coefficient value of 0.45 indicates that a collaborative leadership strategy enhances teacher performance through increased motivation, equal sharing of decisions, and shared accountability for outcomes. This oblique approach to teacher

effectiveness is a crucial process through which leadership influences learning.

The quality of governance plays a crucial role as an important intervening factor, having a direct influence on student achievement while also moderating the effectiveness of leadership. The interaction between distributed leadership and governance quality reveals that collaboration methods are most effective in environments with strong institutional setups, transparent decision-making, and strict accountability systems.

The research also reveals significant differences between urban and rural schools concerning all available variables. In rural schools, leaders are often expected to perform poorly in terms of transformational leadership, as well as in terms of governance quality and student achievement outcomes. Such inequalities are reflective of other trends in infrastructure, teacher distribution, and resource allocation, which disadvantage rural areas.

6. Discussion

Within the scope of existing research on educational leadership effectiveness, the current study contributes to the field while providing findings specific to the Nigerian setting. The robust relationship between transformational leadership and student achievement ($\beta = 0.67$) is consistent with the international literature, which underscores the significance of inspirational and visionary leadership in educational settings (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, the strength of this phenomenon is higher compared to that observed in developed country samples, indicating that transformational leadership plays an enhanced role in situations where teacher motivation and organisational coherence are weaker.

Plausibly mediating this relationship, transformational leadership is shown to exert a concurrent influence on teacher effectiveness ($\beta = 0.46$) and student achievement. Ishola's (2025) study of Nigerian secondary schools similarly observed that transformational leadership strengthened teacher commitment across domains of self-development, student development, and institutional development. A combination of these lines of inquiry demonstrates that transformational leadership has multiple channels of operation, which work cumulatively to enhance educational outcomes. In comparison, distributed leadership serves as an antecedent (not as a determinant) of student performance. It uses its impacts on effective teacher efficacy as an intervening variable instead. This pattern aligns with Spillane's (2006) conception of distributed leadership as a collective, interactional phenomenon. The second chain connection made by the teacher's effectiveness implies an enabling condition. However, this effect does not immediately translate into student learning gains in a manner that appears to be mediated by collaborative leadership structures.

The statistically significant interaction between distributed leadership and the quality of governance puts grey on the existing theoretical models, assigning governance structures as a structural moderator. Findings support Harris and DeFlaminis' (2016) argument that weak governance frames undermine collaborative practices by limiting institutional support. On the other hand, effective governance will provide the framework through which a leader can bring distributive leadership to thrive.

The combined governance score of 2.9 out of 5.0 indicates a significant challenge in the fields of transparency, accountability, and institutional operation. These deficiencies corroborate Akinroluyo and Hammed's (2024) critiques of Nigerian educational governance, wherein political interference, corruption, and weak monitoring persist as endemic issues.

The inequality between urban and rural areas in all variables, including transformational leadership, governance quality, and student achievement, exacerbates the existing disparities in Nigerian development. The rural schools performed significantly worse compared to the urban schools, indicating institutionalised injustices that resulted from inadequate training opportunities, teacher quality, and infrastructure, as well as limited community resources.

The study also supports the report that only 34.2 per cent of students can ensure minimum literacy abilities, and 28.7 per cent can ensure numeracy abilities. Persistent low achievement is concerning, as it falls short of curricular standards and classroom instruction. This result implies that the system may find itself in a state of low achievement where expectation and practice levels converge but fail to meet the targeted cognitive requirements.

The importance of human capital in education development is reflected in the mediating role of teacher effectiveness. Inspirational and motivational programs, as well as individual attention to teachers, seem especially promising.

In conclusion, the study confirms and extends the existing findings on the effectiveness of educational leadership and the representation of context-specific mechanisms. The interactions between distributed leadership and the quality of governance underscore the importance of institutional accountability and coherence, as collaborative models of leadership can be employed to achieve long-term outcomes.

7. Conclusion

Within the framework of modern research on school systems in Nigeria, this study provides empirical evidence that educational leadership and governance play a decisive role in determining the level of learning in state schools. It is established through analysis that positive student performance directly continues under the influence of transformational leadership and, to a much greater extent, directs the student learning performance through mediated methods. Correspondingly, in combination with strong governance structures, distributed leadership increases the effectiveness of teachers. Taken together, the findings present a stark profile of a learning catastrophe whose remedial plan necessitates an integrated approach to reforms that simultaneously strengthens both personal leadership abilities and institutional governance characteristics.

The existing high inequality between urban and rural schooling additionally highlights the necessity of localised initiatives that address deficiencies in the inventory of infrastructure, classrooms, and educational facilities in the less privileged regions. No less significant is the mutually exclusive connection between the quality of governance and the style of leadership: reform in educational establishments is impossible without simultaneous efforts at integrating initiatives on the one hand and supporting individual leadership abilities on the other.

8. Recommendations

Implement Comprehensive Leadership Development Programs: In the broader context of educational reform, it is essential to ensure that schools and universities introduce comprehensive leadership training programs to transform school principals and nurture their transformational leadership potential. Vision articulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration should become the forefront of such initiatives when they have been proven to have a connection with better educational results empirically. Pedagogical experts should aim to ensure that sustainable and regular professional learning is followed, rather than sporadic workshops, to ensure that learning is retained.

Strengthen Educational Governance Systems: Governmental organizations must enhance governance in the field of education by developing transparency, accountability systems, and stakeholder involvement processes. Actions such as raising the level of monitoring performance, decreasing the political influence on the personnel selection process, and optimizing resource allocation processes will provide the institutional framework on which the success of effective leadership can be achieved.

Addressing Urban-Rural Educational Disparities: Policymakers must develop targeted interventions for remote rural schools that effectively address urban-rural educational inequalities. Such interventions can include infrastructure investments, teacher incentive structures, and enhanced support systems.

Distance settings often involve juggling the ideas of geographic segregation, poor infrastructural facilities, and recruitment difficulties, which always demand equity-driven policies that ensure rural students are given equal chances with their urban counterparts.

Enhance Teacher Professional Development and Support: Schools are expected to increase their support for teachers through effective professional development activities. These programs should encompass subject-matter expertise, the development of pedagogical skills, and the creation of working environments that foster effective teaching. Numerous empirical researchers have found that teacher effectiveness is a significant mediator of leadership activities and student learning, thus highlighting the need for high-level teacher support.

Establish Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation Systems: Governments must set up comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems to track their progress simultaneously at the leadership, governance, and learning levels. The evidence base necessary for data-driven decision-making consists of regulatory regimes that include regular evaluations of student performance, teacher performance, and the performance of other institutions.

References

❖ Adeniran, A., Ishaku, J., & Akanni, L. O. (2020). Is Nigeria experiencing a learning crisis: Evidence from curriculum-matched learning assessment. International Journal of Educational Development, 77, 102199. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102199

❖ Aina, J. K. (2023). Inequality of educational opportunities in Nigeria: Impacts on national development. African Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 5(2), 28-34. https://doi.org/10.56557/ajahss/2022/v5i245

❖ Bass, B. M. (1985). Leadership and performance beyond expectations. Free Press.

❖ Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1995). MLQ Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. Mind Garden.

❖ Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). Transformational leadership (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617095

❖ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

❖ Burns, J. M. (1978). Leadership. Harper & Row.

❖ Day, C., Gu, Q., & Sammons, P. (2016). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: How successful school leaders use transformational and instructional strategies to make a difference. Educational Administration Quarterly, 52(2), 221-258. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X15616863

❖ Harris, A., & DeFlaminis, J. (2016). Distributed leadership in practice: Evidence, misconceptions and possibilities. Management in Education, 30(4), 141-146. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020616656734

❖ Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2020). COVID-19 school leadership in disruptive times. School Leadership & Management, 40(4), 243-247. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479

❖ Hulpia, H., Devos, G., & Rosseel, Y. (2009). The relationship between the perception of distributed leadership in secondary schools and teachers' and teacher leaders' job satisfaction and organizational commitment. School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 20(3), 291-317. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243450902909840

❖ Ishola, A. O. (2025). Transformational school leadership in Nigerian secondary schools: Teachers' wellbeing and job satisfaction. Electronic Theses and

Dissertations, 9714. https://doi.org/10.24124/etd.2025.9714

❖ Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. School Leadership & Management, 40(1), 5-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077

❖ Northouse, P. G. (2019). Leadership: Theory and practice (8th ed.). SAGE Publications.

❖ Nwoke, B. I. (2024). Assessing the phenomenon of out-of-school children in Nigeria: Issues, gaps and recommendations. Review of Education, 12(2), 445-472. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.70011

❖ Akinroluyo, B. I., & O., O. H. (2024). Leadership and crisis of governance in Nigeria. International Journal of Business and Management Research, 5(1).

❖ Oplatka, I., & Arar, K. (2017). The research on educational leadership and management in the Arab world since the 1990s: A systematic review. Review of Education, 5(3), 267-307. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3095

❖ Printy, S. M., & Liu, Y. (2021). Distributed leadership globally: The interactive influence of culture and policy. Educational Administration Quarterly, 57(2), 327-362. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X20936346

❖ Robinson, V. M., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. Educational Administration Quarterly, 44(5), 635-674. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08321509

❖ Spillane, J. P. (2006). Distributed leadership. Jossey-Bass. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203064214

❖ Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2004). Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. Journal of Curriculum Studies, 36(1), 3-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000106726

❖ UNESCO. (2017). Education governance in the 21st century: Challenges and opportunities. UNESCO Publishing. https://doi.org/10.54676/MZQI9184

❖ UNESCO. (2023). Global education monitoring report 2023: Technology in education. UNESCO Publishing. https://doi.org/10.54676/CCBF8551