

Mapping the Landscape of Learning-Centred Leadership: A Systematic Review (2019-2023)

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Abstract

Learning-centred Leadership (LCL) is recognised as an effective driver of school reform. Although the number of studies in this area has grown steadily in recent years, a systematic literature review (SLR) on the variable is still lacking. Drawing on the Scopus and ScienceDirect databases, this study systematically analysed 25 empirical articles published between 2019 and 2023 that met predefined inclusion criteria. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol for screening and reporting, the study conducted a detailed evaluation of the research contexts, methodological characteristics, and conceptual underpinnings of LCL. The results indicated that from 2019 to 2023, the LCL research exhibited a fluctuating temporal pattern, with a predominance of quantitative designs. Research settings and targets were primarily concentrated in K–12 schools in Middle Eastern countries. Moreover, there was no consensual definition of LCL; it is generally described as a multidimensional construct. This study may serve as a significant reference for improving the generalisability of LCL research and capturing its nuanced manifestations across diverse educational systems. It lays the groundwork for methodologically diverse, multi-level, and cross-regional research, advancing a more coherent, inclusive, and globally relevant understanding of LCL.

Keywords: Learning-centred Leadership, Systematic Literature Review, Methodological Trends, Contextual Trends, Conceptualisation

Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has reshaped global education, where schools are evolving to Education 4.0 through the deep integration of information technologies to prepare students for future challenges. Within this process, Learning-centred Leadership (LCL) is widely regarded as a critical catalyst in promoting school reforms (Murphy et al., 2006). As central agents of school improvement, principals adopt LCL to inspire, guide, support, and engage teachers in professional learning to promote student achievement and school performance (Liu et al., 2016). Specifically, principals impact school development and student learning by building a learning vision to motivate all school members to learn, providing

support for teacher learning through organising, developing, implementing, managing, and monitoring learning programmes, and modelling through their own behaviour to conduct openness, risk-taking, and collaboration values among school members that link closely to school reforms (Hallinger et al., 2017; Talebizadeh et al., 2021).

According to Wallo et al. (2024), research on LCL could date back to the late 1990s, and the number of empirical studies in this area has grown steadily in recent years; however, there has been a lack of systematic reviews in this field. The gap underscores the necessity and urgency of conducting a systematic review on LCL to clarify future research directions and provide an evidence base for educational transformation. Accordingly, this study adopts an SLR approach to synthesise the LCL literature comprehensively. The review critically assesses the research contexts and methodological paradigms, and summarises and clarifies the concepts of LCL, thereby advancing a more holistic and coherent understanding of the field. This study is guided by the following two core research questions:

- i) What are the methodological and contextual trends in current research on LCL?
- ii) What is the conceptualisation of LCL in the current literature?

Methodology

This study uses the systematic literature review (SLR) approach to systematically collate and analyse the studies regarding LCL (Tremmel et al., 2017). The primary objective of an SLR is to comprehensively identify and integrate relevant studies by employing structured, transparent, and reproducible methods at every stage of the reviewing process (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021).

According to García-Peñalvo (2022), SLR has four main characteristics: systematic, complete, explicit, and duplicable. 'Systematic' means to apply effective ways to identify and locate related articles to mitigate bias and subjectivity. Unlike traditional literature review, which may rely on the expertise and subjective judgment of the researcher, SLR adopts a scientific approach that utilises precise, objective, and replicable methods to systematically locate, include, and analyse all relevant studies on a specific question to improve quality and minimise bias in study selection, appraisal, and synthesis (Lame, 2019; Nightingale, 2009). 'Complete' refers to including all eligible literature that meets the requirements. Specifically, SLR encourages the exploration of studies beyond the scholars' own research area to find more valuable evidence and provide a just and fair conclusion by employing the comprehensive and standard search approach and inclusion criteria, whereas traditional literature review often focuses on studies familiar to the researcher or can be identified via a cursory search (Lame, 2019; Mallett et al., 2012; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021). 'Explicit' indicates that the procedures for conducting SLR are clearly outlined and fully demonstrated without ambiguity (Okoli, 2015). 'Duplicable' means that the data sources, search procedures, and selection criteria are publicly available, allowing other researchers to test their accuracy (García-Peñalvo, 2022).

In this study, SLR is conducted by following the procedure of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (García-Peñalvo, 2022; Leber et al., 2021; Tremmel et al., 2017). As presented in Figure 1, the PRISMA searching process comprises three primary steps: identification, screening, and eligibility (Tai & Omar, 2022).

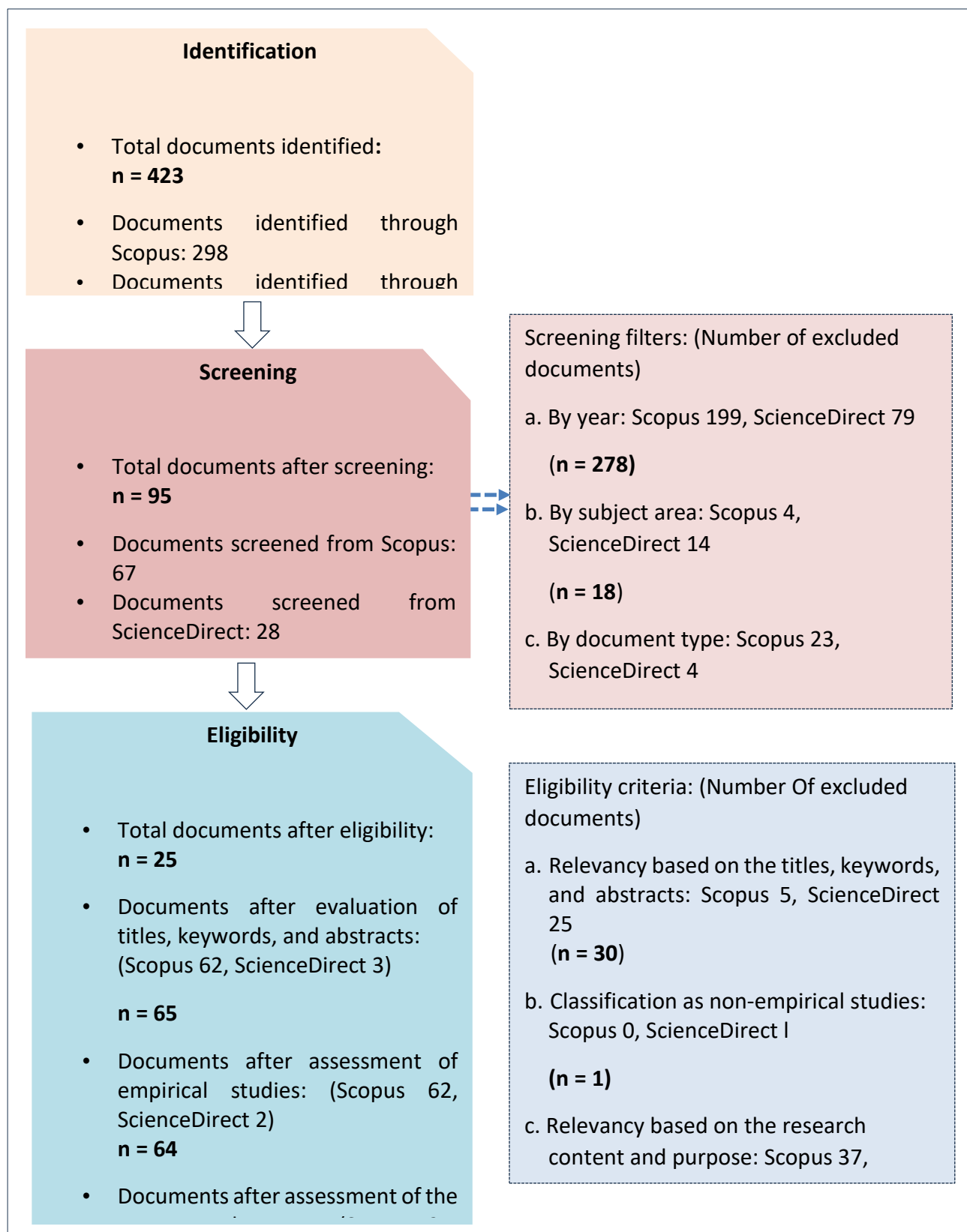


Figure 1: Literature Selection Flowchart of LCL

Stage One: Identification

This phase is determining the amount of studies retrieved from every database using appropriate keywords during the search process (García-Peñalvo, 2022; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021). The researcher adopted two databases to examine the related literature, which were Scopus and ScienceDirect, respectively. The reasons for choosing these two databases are that both the Scopus and ScienceDirect databases provide extensive, high-quality, well-referenced, and peer-reviewed educational resources (Tai & Omar, 2022). Besides, they also employ easy-to-understand language to process the search and satisfy all phases of the SLR (Rochman, 2022).

The researcher utilised keywords such as "Learning-centred Leadership", "Learning-centered Leadership", or "Leadership for Learning" to identify the valuable articles. In the Scopus database, the default method was used, i.e., searching by titles, abstracts, and keywords. On the other hand, in the ScienceDirect database, to ensure consistency in the search scope, the advanced search mode was applied, which included selecting titles, abstracts, and keywords and using the specified above-mentioned terms for the search. In this stage, a total of 423 documents were determined (Scopus: 298, ScienceDirect: 125), as shown in Figure 1.

Stage Two: Screening

Screening means removing articles that are repeated or do not satisfy the inclusion standard. Indeed, a thorough review protocol must be created to direct the screening process for selecting the relevant research at this stage (Ain et al., 2019). For example, to determine the latest research trends and gaps regarding LCL, this study restricted the search time range for the recent five years, from 2019 to 2023. During this process, 278 articles that did not meet the time frame demands were excluded (199 from Scopus and 79 from ScienceDirect). Thus, a total of 145 articles were retained, including 99 from Scopus and 46 from ScienceDirect. Subsequently, the researcher applied the academic category filtering method and removed 18 articles not classified under social sciences (four from Scopus and 14 from ScienceDirect).

As a result, 127 relevant articles were kept, with 95 from Scopus and 32 from ScienceDirect. Furthermore, this study adopted a document-type extracting method to exclude sources that did not fall under the group of research articles, such as book chapters, reviews, and notes. In this process, 27 documents were excluded (23 from Scopus and four from ScienceDirect), leaving a total of 100 articles (72 from Scopus and 28 from ScienceDirect). Finally, the researcher conducted a language-based filter, excluding non-English language documents, resulting in the retention of 95 qualified articles (67 from Scopus and 28 from ScienceDirect), as shown in Figure 1.

Stage Three: Eligibility

The final eligible inclusion stage involves selecting articles that eventually meet the SLR inclusion criteria. In this stage, the researcher performed a more meticulous and comprehensive evaluation to select the articles for review. Specifically, the SLR focuses on aspects related to LCL, such as definitions, characteristics, models, theories, and influencing factors. Therefore, this study carefully reviewed the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the articles retained from the second stage to determine their relevance to the research objective. This approach eliminated 30 unrelated articles (five from Scopus and 25 from ScienceDirect), leaving 65 (62 from Scopus and three from ScienceDirect). Then, non-

empirical studies were removed (zero from Scopus and one from ScienceDirect), and as a result, 64 articles were included in the process (Scopus: 62, ScienceDirect: two). Finally, the researcher conducted a more detailed and thorough assessment of the 64 articles to identify further those that aligned closely with the research purpose by reading the articles' contents. After this step, 39 irrelevant articles were excluded (37 from Scopus and two from ScienceDirect), resulting in the retention of 25 articles (25 from Scopus and zero from ScienceDirect).

Results

As mentioned above, no article in ScienceDirect maintained after the final evaluation. Therefore, the following discussion concentrated solely on Scopus. The 25 selected literature in Scopus underwent systematic review according to the year of publication, the research method adopted, the level of education involved, and the country in which the study was conducted.

Initially, the researcher systematically compiled and analysed the publication years of studies related to LCL. Figure 2 below presents the annual distribution of LCL research in the Scopus and ScienceDirect databases from 2019 to 2023. For example, in Scopus, from 2019 to 2020, research on LCL exhibited an upward trend, with the number of studies increasing from three in 2019 to nine in 2020. However, the number of studies declined in the following two years, dropping from seven in 2021 to one in 2022. However, in 2023, research regarding LCL began to rise again, with the number increasing to five in 2023. Meanwhile, in ScienceDirect, studies on LCL have consistently been zero. As illustrated in Figure 2, the research on LCL in the past five years demonstrates a fluctuating pattern of initial growth, followed by a decline and then another increase. This trend suggests that the development of research in the LCL field has a phase-dependent nature, which may be influenced by various factors, such as the changes in academic resources, fluctuations in the external reforms or technological advances at a particular time.

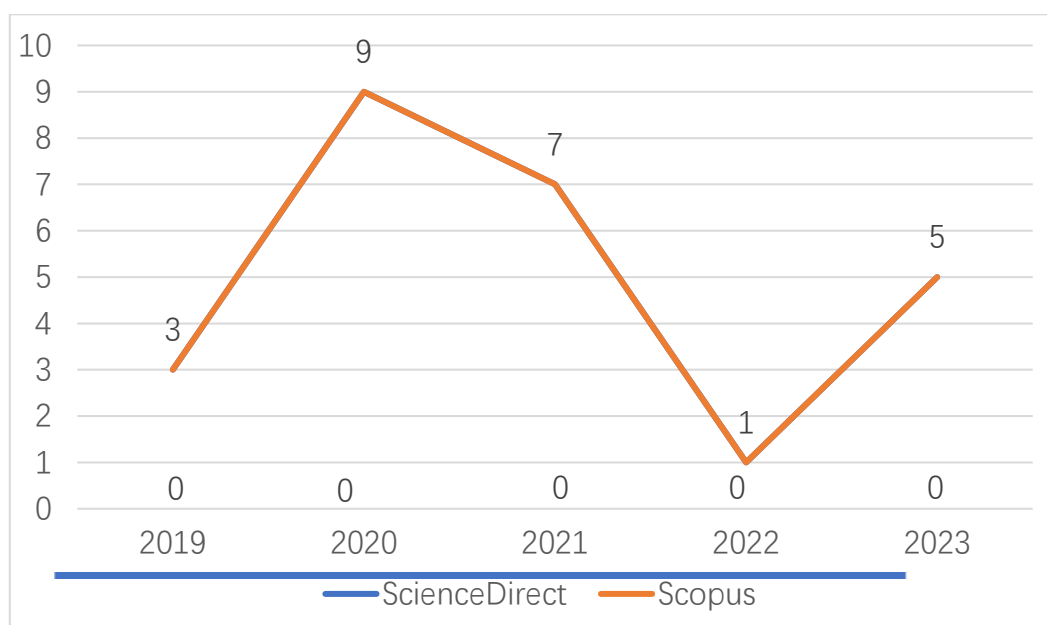


Figure 2: Distribution of LCL Research by Publishing Year

Next, this study analysed the research methods employed in LCL literature, and Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of research methods in these studies. In the Scopus database, the quantitative research method is the predominant approach, accounting for 72% (n=18) of the total 25 studies. The second most common method is the mixed research approach, comprising 16% (n=4). The qualitative research method is the least used, representing only 12% (n=3) of the studies. On the other hand, there were no articles published in the ScienceDirect database. The findings indicate an imbalance in the choice of research methods in the field of LCL, with quantitative research significantly dominating. Based on this, future studies should place greater emphasis on qualitative and mixed method approaches to provide a more diversified and comprehensive understanding of LCL.

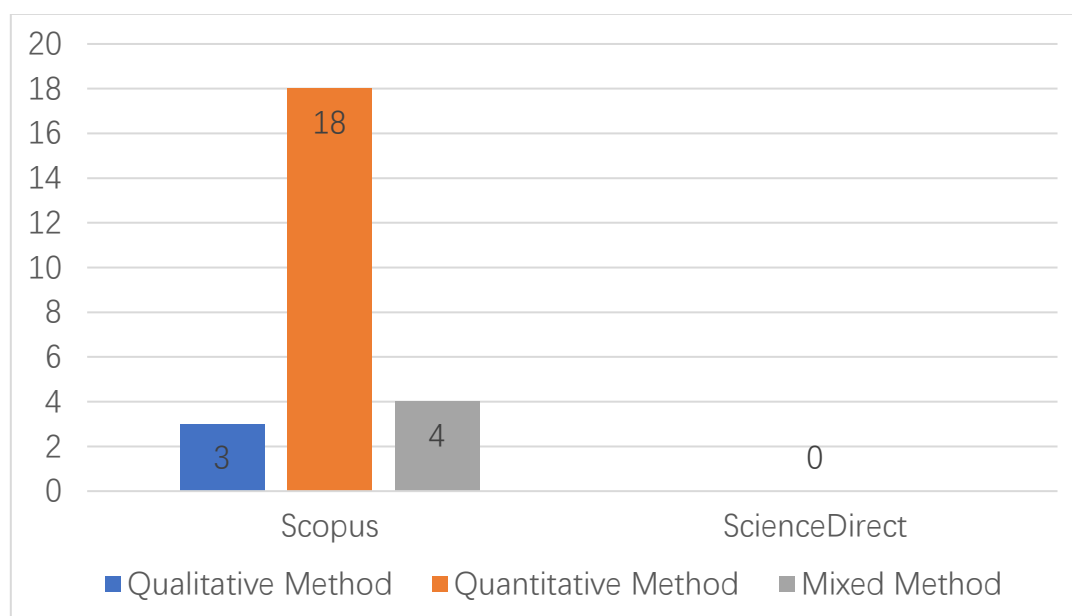


Figure 3: Distribution of LCL Articles by Research Method

Subsequently, this study analysed the educational levels addressed in LCL research. As shown in Figure 4, the results illustrate the distribution of articles across different school levels. There was no article from the ScienceDirect database, so the analysis was conducted solely based on the Scopus database. The analysis finds that LCL research dominates at the K-12 level, with a total of 24 articles, accounting for 96% of the total. Additionally, only one study involves both Pre-K12 and K-12 levels, exploring the impacts of LCL on the professional learning of kindergarten and K-12 teachers in the context of "Thailand 4.0" (Kulophas & Kim, 2020). The above findings indicate that LCL research is primarily concentrated at the K-12 level (including primary, middle, and high schools). However, research at other educational levels is relatively scarce, particularly in higher education, which suggests that LCL studies highlight the need to expand the scope of future research, particularly in higher education.

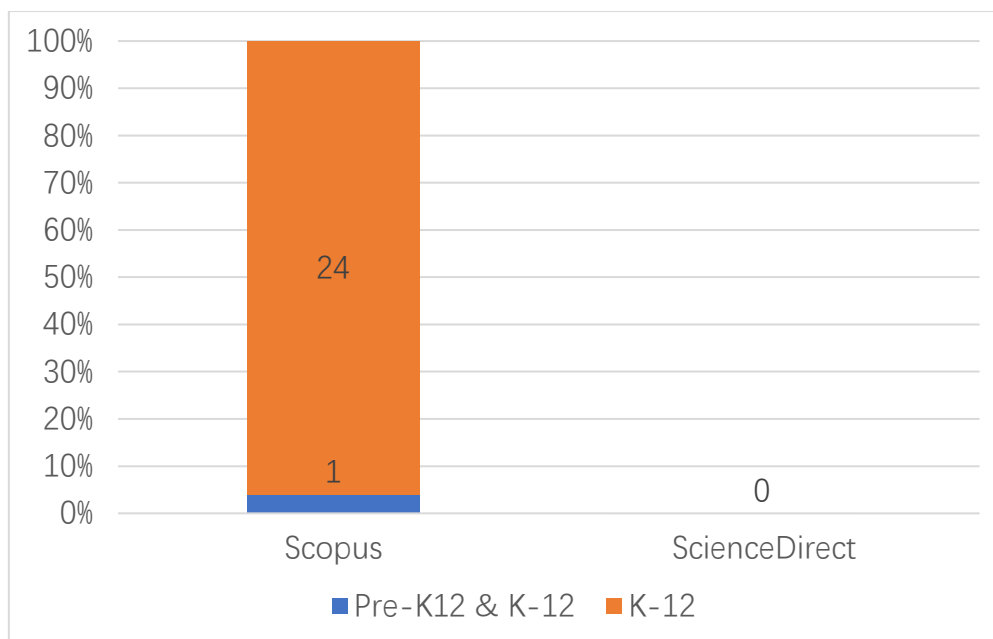


Figure 4: Distribution of LCL Research by Educational Level

Finally, the researcher analysed the geographical distribution of countries in LCL-related studies, as shown in Figure 5. Given that no article was from the ScienceDirect database, the analysis was conducted based on the Scopus database. The analysis shows that Türkiye has the highest number of LCL publications, with eight articles accounting for 32% of the total. The second highest is Thailand, with three articles, accounting for 12%. China and the United States each have two articles, representing 8%. Additionally, two studies involved multiple countries. For example, Hallinger et al. (2019) conducted comparative research on the relationships among LCL, teacher trust, agency, and professional learning in China and Thailand. Ahn et al. (2021) analysed sample data from 47 countries to explore the multilevel learning leadership structure and its influences on educational leadership practice and research. Other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Slovenia, Netherlands, Germany, Egypt, Iran, Belgium, and Kuwait, contributed only one article.

A careful analysis of the above data reveals an uneven geographic distribution in LCL research. Overall, Middle Eastern countries, such as Türkiye, Iran, and Kuwait, account for the largest number of studies (10), followed by Asia (6), including Thailand and China, Europe (5) with countries like Britain, Slovenia, Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium, and North America (2), with research primarily from American. Meanwhile, research from Africa is the least represented, with only one article.

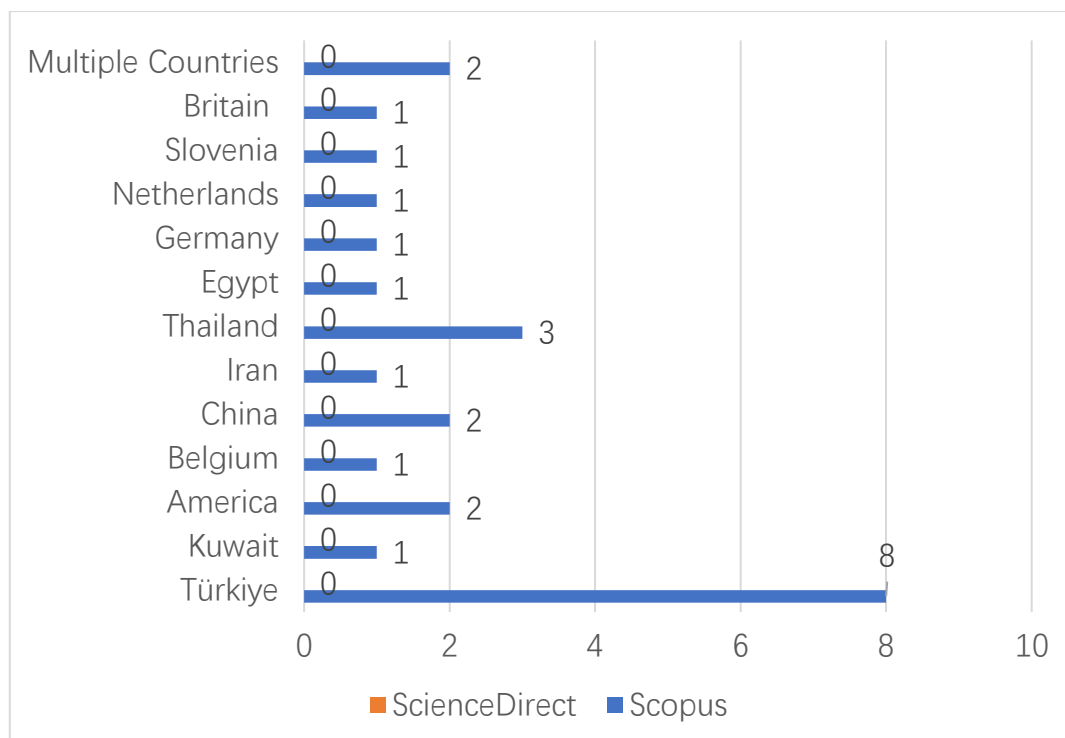


Figure 5: Distribution of LCL Research by Research Nations

In conclusion, the analysis of worldwide LCL research over the past five years reveals key trends and research gaps in the field. The annual fluctuations in publication numbers indicate the time-dependent nature of research in this area. Quantitative methods dominate the LCL research landscape, underscoring the pressing need for more qualitative and mixed-method studies. Furthermore, the focus on K-12 education LCL research highlights a significant void in higher education. The unbalanced geographic distribution of LCL studies emphasises the existence of regional disparities. These findings suggest the necessity for more balanced, diversified, and comprehensive future research efforts in LCL.

Definition of LCL

LCL emerges as an educational leadership style designed to enhance teaching quality and student learning outcomes by fostering the professional development of school members, particularly teachers (Aslan et al., 2023; Tai & Omar, 2024). LCL has continuously received significant attention from global educational institutions due to its effectiveness in enhancing teaching practices and student achievement (AKGUN, 2021; Tai & Omar, 2024). Particularly since the 1980s, effective school reform and restructuring initiatives have strengthened the principals' central role in promoting LCL development (Talebizadeh et al., 2021). However, LCL is defined differently across the literature, and a unified conceptual framework for LCL has yet to be established (AKGUN, 2021).

According to Murphy et al. (2006), LCL refers to "creating powerful, equitable learning opportunities for students, professionals, and the system, and motivating or compelling participants to take advantage of these opportunities" (p.3). Meanwhile, they highlighted that LCL encompasses the following two key characteristics: (i) continuously focusing on the cores of school education, including technology, teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment;

and (ii) ensuring that other facets of school (such as management, organisation, and finance) effectively support and facilitate the improvement of student learning (Murphy et al., 2006). On the other hand, Hallinger and Heck (2010) proposed that LCL is conceptualised with three key aspects. First is *Vision*, which involves taking measures to unite all school members to enhance student learning outcomes and cultivate commitment. Second, *Governance* refers to empowering staff and encouraging active engagement in the decision-making processes of the school. Third, *Resources Allocation* entails supplying teachers and students with the resources to facilitate their teaching and learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Moreover, Hallinger et al. (2017) asserted that LCL has identical roots with instructional leadership, leadership for learning, and learning-focused leadership. Therefore, the terminology used to describe LCL is interchangeable among these terms (Dimmock & Tan, 2016).

Furthermore, Liu et al. (2016) provided a widely accepted definition of LCL and defined it as "a process whereby school leaders engage in intentional efforts to guide, direct, support and participate in teacher learning with the goal of increasing their professional knowledge, and ultimately promote student learning and school effectiveness" (p. 6). Several scholars, such as Hallinger et al. (2019) and Liu and Hallinger (2017), have adopted this definition, and it has become one of the foundational concepts in LCL research.

Besides, AKGUN (2021) suggested that LCL has two fundamental characteristics. On the one hand, LCL is influenced by school leaders' prior experiences, accumulated knowledge, personal attributes, values, and beliefs, which shape classroom activities, school management, and, ultimately, student academic performance. On the other hand, LCL emphasises that teacher professional development as a means to improve overall school effectiveness and learning outcomes. These perspectives highlight the multifaceted role of LCL in fostering school, teacher, and student success within the educational system.

Notably, another important interpretation of LCL is the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education. It is based on decades of study on educational leadership, incorporating the conceptual frameworks of Hallinger (2003) and Murphy et al. (2006), identifying six key processes within LCL (Wright et al., 2023). The key processes describe the specific LCL actions necessary to influence organisational change and improve student outcomes. These processes include *Planning*, where LCL leaders articulate a unified direction and consistent policies, strategies, and procedures to achieve high student performance; *Implementing*, which involves engaging individuals, ideas, and resources to execute the necessary actions for achieving student success; *Supporting*, which creates the conducive conditions by securing and utilising resources to foster school learning; *Advocating*, which promotes the varied requirements of students both within and beyond schools; *Communicating*, ensuring effective exchange of information among school members and external communities; and *Monitoring*, involving the systematic collection and analysis of data to guide decision-making for continuous improvement (Wright et al., 2023).

Overall, LCL is a dynamic educational leadership concept focusing on student academic achievement and supporting teachers' professional growth. It aligns leadership practices with the broader goals of school improvement and adapts to the evolving needs of teachers and students in an ever-changing educational landscape. Researchers from various countries have

defined LCL, which helps to deepen our understanding of the role of LCL in promoting a culture of learning in schools.

Conclusion

This literature review intends to address the contextual, methodological trends, and definitions of LCL, based on 25 qualifying articles gathered from 2019 to 2023. The findings indicate that LCL has received increasing academic attention worldwide, especially in Middle Eastern and Asian countries. LCL studies have utilised various methods, such as quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies, with quantitative research being the most predominant. Meanwhile, this review underscores the comprehensive and multifaceted essence of LCL through extensive research on its definition.

In summary, this study systematically reviews the recent advances and research trends in the LCL field, providing valuable contributions to the existing literature in terms of methodological frameworks and conceptual delineation, while also highlighting the diversity of the LCL concept across different cultural backgrounds. The research reveals pronounced imbalances in methodological choices, educational stage coverage, and geographic distribution. These findings provide a clear direction and lay the groundwork for future research that employs diverse methods, spans multiple educational levels, and undertakes cross-regional comparative studies. Such future efforts are essential not only for enhancing the generalisability of findings but also for capturing the nuanced ways in which LCL manifests across varying educational systems, socio-cultural contexts, and leadership structures. By addressing these gaps, researchers can contribute to the development of a more coherent, inclusive, and globally relevant understanding of LCL.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite providing a relatively comprehensive and detailed synthesis of the latest developments on LCL, this study inevitably has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, although a systematic search was conducted in Scopus and ScienceDirect databases, it did not cover literature indexed in other databases, which may have led to omissions of relevant studies and, in turn, affected our understanding of the LCL and the generalisability of the conclusions. Second, the temporal scope was restricted to 2019–2023; studies published prior to 2019 and after 2023 were not included, possibly resulting in the absence of early work and the most recent advances. Third, given that the inclusion criteria prioritised empirical research, non-empirical literature was not systematically incorporated, which may limit the extent to which insights from different dimensions are fully captured.

Evidence from this review indicates that existing research on LCL exhibits a marked geographic concentration, predominantly focused on the Middle East countries; therefore, future work should undertake cross-cultural and cross-regional comparative, multi-site studies to assess the applicability of LCL. Meanwhile, the literature is dominated by quantitative designs and K–12 settings, which limits the capacity to capture the complexity and dynamism of LCL. Future research should adopt a more diverse methodological repertoire and extend investigations to additional educational levels to systematically characterise LCL across varied educational ecologies. At the conceptual level, LCL continues to lack a unified, clear, and operationalisable definition. To support more coherent research

and practice, a systematic conceptual analysis and theoretical integration are recommended to clarify its core dimensions and underlying constructs.

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