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PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW AND BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF SCOPUS 2025–2026

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Abstract

Principals face complex demands, ranging from learning quality and digital transformation to personal well-being. This study maps the development of publications, scholarly contributions, and key themes of principal and school leader studies through a systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis. Scopus data was extracted on November 10, 2026, using the query ("principal" "school leader") in the title, abstract, and keywords, filtered by year 2025–2026, article, English language, open access, and subject areas of social sciences, management, and psychology, resulting in 225 articles. Publications totaled 110 articles in 2025 and 115 in 2026 (preliminary data). The United States (35), Australia (28), the United Kingdom and Malaysia (15 each) contributed the most; Indonesia was in fifth place (14). Prominent keywords were school leadership, principals, leadership, and educational leadership. Key themes included instructional leadership, professional development, inclusion and social justice, well-being, and digital leadership and artificial intelligence. Teacher resistance to digital change has not yet become an explicit keyword, thus becoming an opportunity for further research.

Keywords: bibliometric analysis; principal; school leadership; systematic literature review; VOSviewer

INTRODUCTION

Principals play a central role in determining the direction and quality of schools. International studies show that the work of school leaders demands high emotional intensity and directly impacts their health, well-being, and personal lives (McKay et al., 2025). At the same time, the professional development of experienced principals remains essential for leadership to support school quality improvement (Sahlin, 2025). Therefore, understanding how research on principals has evolved is important for policymakers, leadership training providers, and researchers.

Digital transformation adds a new dimension to the role of the principal. Ruloff and Petko (2025) examine how principals' educational goals and leadership styles influence their approach to digital transformation in high schools. Mizova et al. (2026) examine the strategic management of digital transformation in Bulgarian schools through the practices and leadership styles of principals as digital leaders. Developments in generative artificial intelligence are also beginning to enter the research landscape: Berkovich (2025) discusses its use in instructional leadership and school management, Adams and Feng (2026) examine the acceptance and use of GenAI by school leaders in China, and DeMatthews et al. (2026) propose a six-domain framework for the ethical and equitable use of AI in schools.

These demands go hand in hand with work pressures. Arnold et al. (2025) analyzed 16,460 survey responses of Australian public school leaders from 2011–2020 to examine work stress and burnout. Bailey and Gibson (2026) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic increased stress, trauma, and isolation among international school leaders. Studies on crisis leadership, such as those by Sheena et al. (2025) and Brown and Jones (2025), demonstrate how principals adapt leadership behaviors amid uncertainty. Resilience has also been examined in other contexts, such as among female vice-principals at a vocational college in China (Yin & Liu, 2026).

Another widely studied aspect is leadership for inclusion and social justice. Pazey et al. (2026) examined principals' efforts to build an inclusive culture in a rapidly growing school environment, Vlachou and Tsirantonaki (2026) examined the relationship between transformational leadership, self-efficacy, and inclusive policy

implementation, and Gümüş et al. (2026) examined social justice leadership in Turkey with Ecological Systems Theory. Studies on gender and professional identity, such as those by Gil-Espinosa et al. (2026) and López-Yáñez et al. (2026), add to our understanding of the diversity of principals' experiences.

While empirical studies are widespread, they tend to be fragmented by theme, country context, and theoretical approach. Research on digital leadership, for example, has developed alongside research on well-being and social justice without a comprehensive mapping of recent publications. This study addresses this need by systematically mapping publications from 2025–2026. The degree of novelty and specific gaps still need to be ascertained through a thorough reading of the articles in the corpus.

This study combines a systematic literature review (SLR) with bibliometric analysis. The SLR was used to synthesize research content in a structured manner, while the bibliometric analysis mapped publication developments, author and institutional contributions, geographic distribution, publication sources, and interrelationships between themes. This combination is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of the study of principals and school leaders and future research directions.

Based on this background, this study answers the following three research questions:

RQ1: How will scientific publications on principals and school leaders develop in the 2025–2026 period?

RQ2: What is the distribution and contribution of publications by author, institution, country, journal, and subject area?

RQ3: What are the key themes, research trends, research gaps, and future research directions regarding principals and school leaders?

This research is expected to contribute through quantitative mapping of publication development and thematic synthesis of selected articles. The results can help researchers understand the structure of the field of study and provide input for principal development programs, school leadership policies, and further research. Conclusions regarding gaps are based on the data and articles analyzed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

School leadership is understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership, as well as professional development, well-being, and a commitment to inclusion and equity. The ten themes in Table 1 were compiled from the articles in the corpus and from the most frequently occurring keywords; these themes serve as a framework for reading the bibliometric results in the following section.

The first group of themes relates to leadership styles and practices. Instructional leadership is associated with teacher efficacy, student performance (Gechere et al., 2025), and teacher job satisfaction (Guo et al., 2026). Distributed leadership is examined in relation to student engagement through teacher organizational commitment (Emiru & Berhanu, 2025), while the integration of transformational, instructional, and distributed styles is associated with faculty trust in elementary schools in Cyprus (Keravnos et al., 2025). Professional learning communities also act as intermediaries between principal leadership and instructional innovation (Paletta & Alimehmeti, 2026).

The second group of themes covers professional development and principal identity. Sahlin (2025) examined how experienced principals interpret their professional learning, while Harvie et al. (2025) studied aspiring principals participating in the Into Headship program in Scotland using an ecological agency model. Principals' professional identity in Spain was examined by López-Yáñez et al. (2026), and gender differences in leadership styles by Gil-Espinosa et al. (2026).

The third theme cluster covers well-being, resilience, and leadership during times of crisis. The emotional intensity of school leaders' work (McKay et al., 2025), work stress and burnout (Arnold et al., 2025), and the impact of the pandemic on leader well-being (Bailey & Gibson, 2026) indicate that school leaders' well-being is a research concern. Adaptive leadership and crisis leadership are examined by Brown and Jones (2025) and Sheena et al. (2025).

The fourth theme cluster relates to inclusion, social justice, and digital technology and artificial intelligence. Inclusive leadership is associated with academic optimism and teacher collaboration (Adams et al., 2025), an inclusive culture (Pazey et al., 2026), and the implementation of inclusive policies (Vlachou & Tsirantonaki, 2026). On the technology side, studies include leadership for digital transformation (Ruloff & Petko, 2025; Mizova et al., 2026) and the use of generative AI by school leaders (Berkovich, 2025; Adams & Feng, 2026; DeMatthews et al., 2026).

Overall, the ten themes in Table 1 indicate that research on principals is spread across leadership styles, professional development, well-being, inclusion, and technology. This study combines SLR and bibliometric analysis

to map publication patterns and relationships between these themes. Claims of novelty and gaps need to be reconfirmed based on articles actually included in the corpus.

Table 1. Main Themes of Research on Principals and School Leaders in the Corpus

No.	Theme	Definition	Reference
1	Instructional leadership	The role of the principal in leading and supporting the teaching and learning process to improve teacher and student performance.	Gechere et al. (2025); Guo et al. (2026)
2	Transformational and distributed leadership	A leadership style that drives change and shares leadership responsibilities with teachers and staff.	Emiru & Berhanu (2025); Keravnos et al. (2025)
3	Digital leadership and digital transformation	Principals' leadership practices and styles in managing digital change in schools.	Ruloff & Petko (2025); Mizova et al. (2026)
4	Artificial intelligence in school leadership	Acceptance, use, and ethical frameworks for the use of generative AI by school leaders.	Berkovich (2025); Adams & Feng (2026); DeMatthews et al. (2026)
5	Professional development and preparation of school principals	Professional learning and preparation programs that shape the agency and capacity of principals.	Sahlin (2025); Harvie et al. (2025)
6	Well-being, stress, and resilience	Mental health, emotional intensity, and resilience of school leaders in facing work demands.	McKay et al. (2025); Arnold et al. (2025); Yin & Liu (2026)
7	Crisis and pandemic leadership	Adaptive behavior and leadership of school principals during crises, especially the COVID-19 pandemic.	Brown & Jones (2025); Sheena et al. (2025); Bailey & Gibson (2026)
8	Inclusive education and social justice	Leadership to build inclusive cultures and policies and reduce educational inequality.	Pazey et al. (2026); Gümuş et al. (2026); Vlachou & Tsirantonaki (2026)
9	Gender and professional identity	Differences in leadership styles according to gender and the formation of the principal's professional identity.	Gil-Espinosa et al. (2026); López-Yáñez et al. (2026)
10	Professional learning community and teacher collaboration	The role of leadership in building teacher collaboration and learning communities that encourage teaching innovation.	Paletta & Alimehmeti (2026); Adams et al. (2025)

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a hybrid design combining a systematic literature review (SLR) and bibliometric analysis. The SLR was used to structure the literature and synthesize the study's focus, while the bibliometric analysis illustrated publication trends, author and institutional contributions, geographic distribution, journal sources, and keyword relationships. Reporting of document selection followed the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021).

Bibliographic data were obtained from the Scopus database on November 10, 2026. A search of titles, abstracts, and keywords with an initial query of ("principal" OR "school leader") in 2025–2026 yielded 119,207 records. Most of these records contained the word "principal" in other contexts, such as principal component analysis (48,074 documents), so the query was narrowed to the phrase ("principal" "school leader"), yielding 486 records. The final export file contained 225 articles with title, author, year, abstract, keywords, source, affiliation, DOI, and citation count. The complete query, search date, and export file were saved to allow for replication of the study.

Document selection followed Figure 1 and all figures were verified directly on the Scopus results page on November 10, 2026. Of the 486 records, eight documents in languages other than English were excluded, leaving 478. Restriction on article document type excluded 99 documents (51 book chapters, 19 books, 14 reviews, 10 conference papers, and 5 others) leaving 379 articles. The open access filter (All open access) retained 238 articles and excluded 141 articles that were not open; the Green (114), Gold (111), Hybrid Gold (110), and Bronze (6) categories may overlap. Finally, the subject area was restricted to Social Sciences, Business, Management and Accounting, Psychology, and Computer Science, leaving 13 articles excluded, resulting in 225 articles analyzed in the 2025–2026 period, the same number as in the export file.

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, a descriptive analysis summarized the number of publications per year and their distribution by country (based on author affiliation), institution, journal, author, and subject area. Second, a bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer version 1.6.21 visualized the collaboration network between countries and keyword co-occurrences. A keyword map was created from a Scopus export file with occurrence weights. In the keyword map reported in Figure 10(b), VOSviewer selected 64 keywords forming 10

clusters with 293 links and a total link strength of 377. The keyword list included both author keywords and index keywords, so general terms such as article, human, female, and male appeared and were excluded from Table 2 as they were not thematically meaningful. [Confirmation of the minimum threshold for occurrence and thesaurus usage from the VOSviewer project.] Since the year 2026 had not yet ended when the data were extracted, the number of publications for 2026 was treated as provisional data.

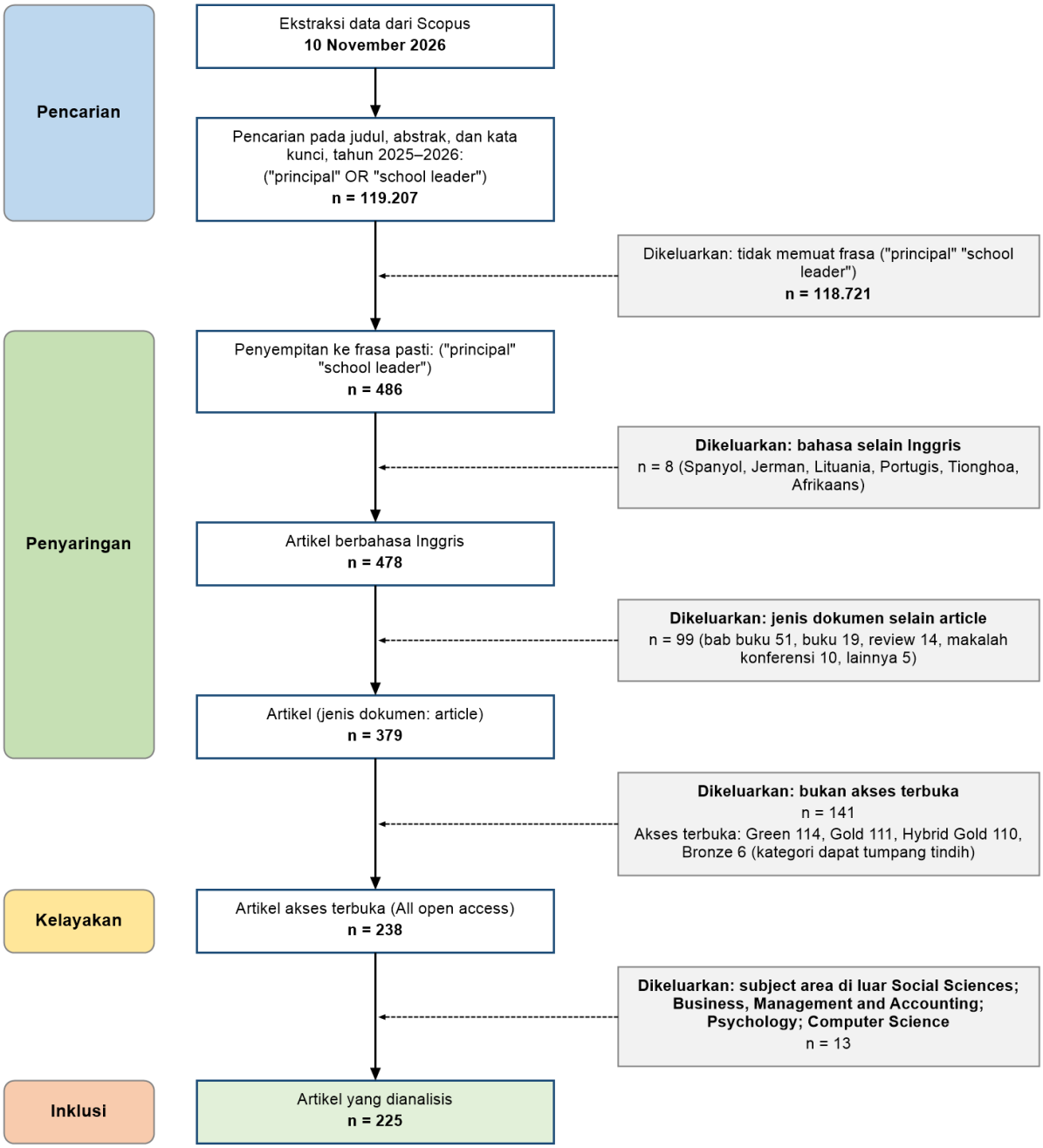


Figure 1. Information flow of Systematic Literature Review using PRISMA

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: Development of scientific publications

Based on Scopus data, there were 225 articles published in the 2025–2026 period, consisting of 110 articles in 2025 and 115 articles in 2026. The 2026 figure is preliminary because the publication year has not yet ended, so this pattern cannot be interpreted as final annual growth. Nevertheless, the number of publications in 2026, which had already surpassed that in 2025 at the time of data extraction, indicates continued high scientific attention to principals and school leaders.

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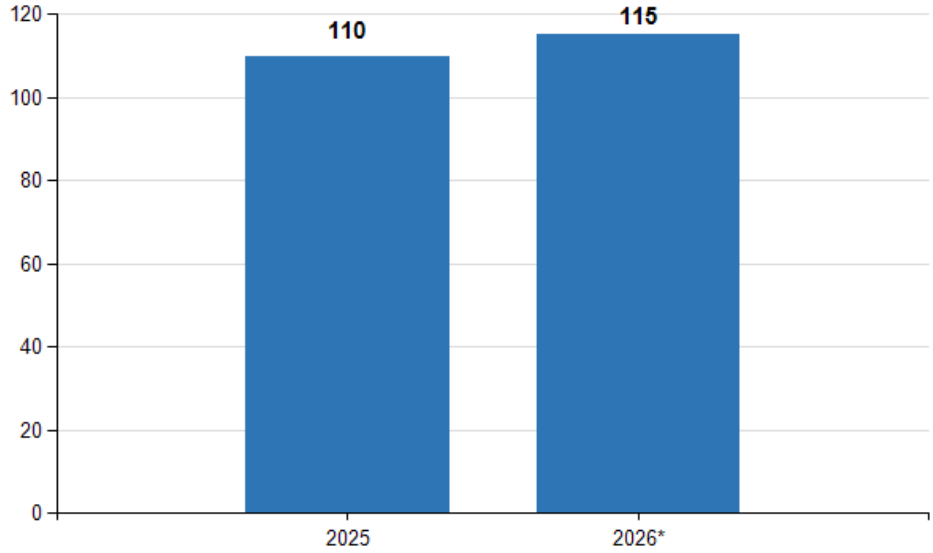


Figure 2. Number of publications per year (Scopus, extracted 10 November 2026; *2026 is provisional data).

This direction aligns with recent studies examining the emotional intensity of school leadership (McKay et al., 2025), leadership for digital transformation (Ruloff & Petko, 2025), and the use of generative AI in school leadership (Berkovich, 2025). All three are among the most highly cited articles in the corpus (73, 60, and 27 citations, respectively).

RQ2: Distribution and contribution of publications

Distribution by country

Based on author affiliation, the United States had the most articles (35), followed by Australia (28), and the United Kingdom and Malaysia (15 each). Indonesia was fifth with 14 articles, followed by Sweden (13), China and South Africa (12 each), and Norway and the United Arab Emirates (10 each). An article may be counted in more than one country if the authors are from multiple countries. The number of publications does not indicate the quality or citation impact of a country.

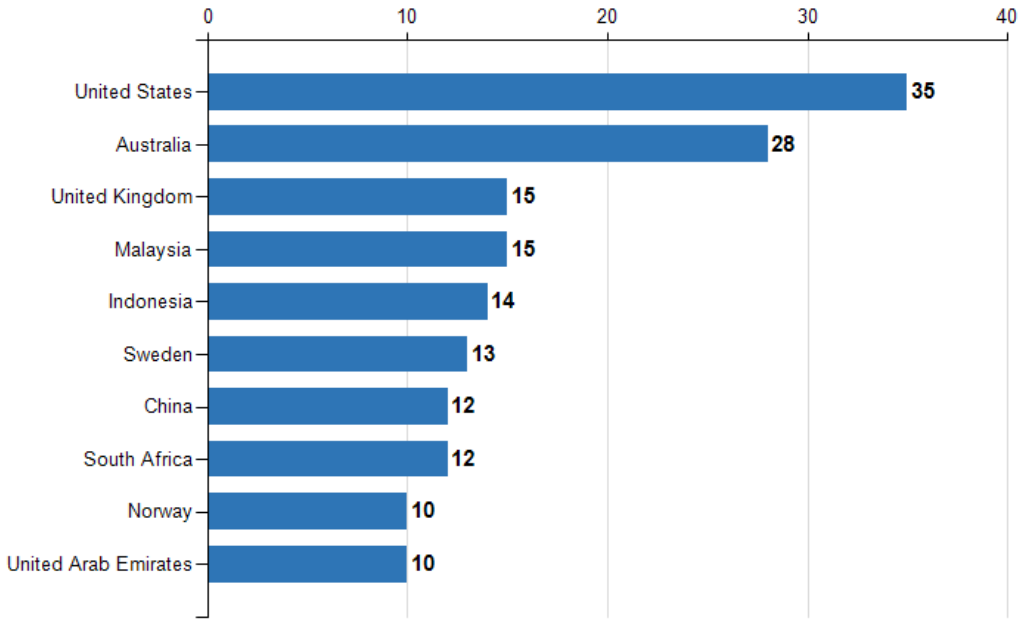


Figure 3. Ten countries with the highest number of publications based on author affiliation.

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Collaboration between countries

The VOSviewer collaboration map shows the interconnectedness between countries. The largest nodes are the United States and Australia, followed by the United Kingdom, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Based on the total link strength calculated from author affiliations, Australia has the highest linkages (22), followed by Malaysia (16), Germany (12), China (11), and the United Kingdom (10); the United States has only 9 despite having the most articles, indicating that many of its articles originate from a single country. There are several colored clusters, for example, the United States, South Africa, Ireland, and Spain; the Australia, Hong Kong, and Turkey cluster; and the Malaysia and Bahrain cluster. Total link strength is calculated from the Scopus export file with full counting and may differ slightly from the VOSviewer output.

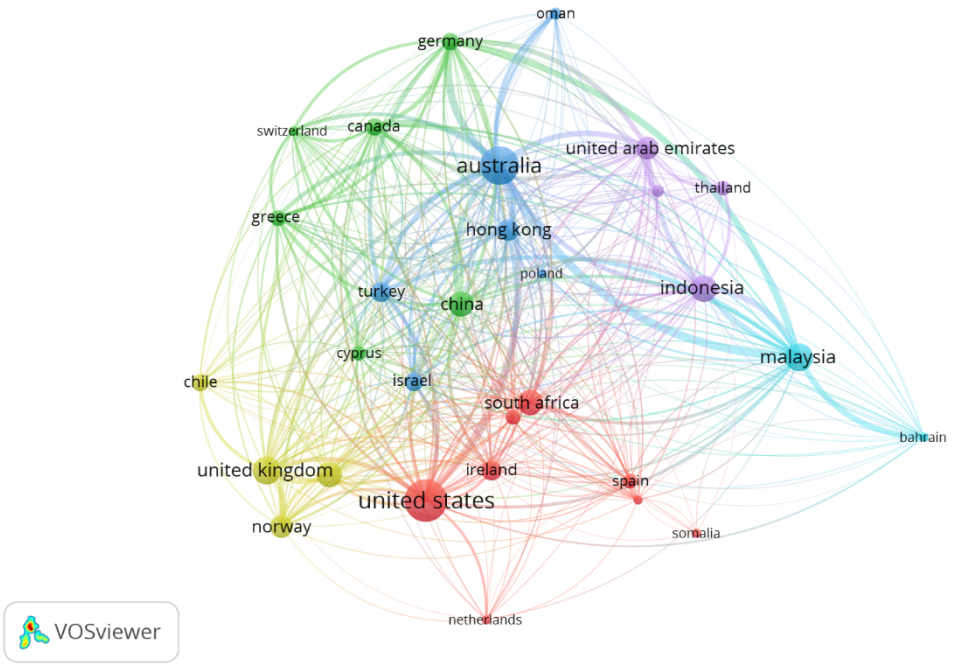


Figure 4. Map of the inter-country collaboration network (VOSviewer).

The map shows that the principal studies are cross-national, with countries from Asia-Pacific, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East involved. This interpretation reflects the network structure within the dataset, not a direct measure of the quality or impact of a country's research.

Distribution by institutional affiliation

The institutions with the most articles were The Education University of Hong Kong (7), Monash University and Umeå University (6 each), and the University of Melbourne, the University of Oslo, and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (5 each). This distribution indicates that contributions come from many institutions without being concentrated in any one institution.

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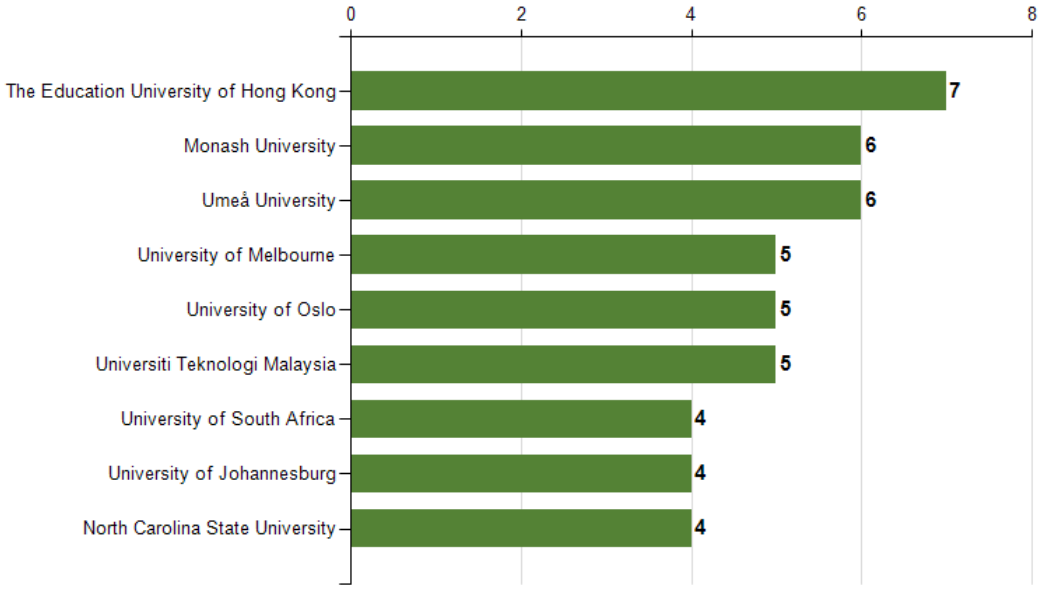


Figure 5. Institutions with the largest number of publications.

Distribution by journal

Educational Management Administration and Leadership was the largest source with 22 articles, followed by Education Sciences (19) and Frontiers in Education (17). School Leadership and Management contained nine articles, while the International Journal of Leadership in Education and Management in Education each contained seven articles. This distribution indicates that the topic of principals is concentrated in educational leadership and management journals and open access education journals. The number of articles alone is not sufficient to conclude the quality or influence of a journal.

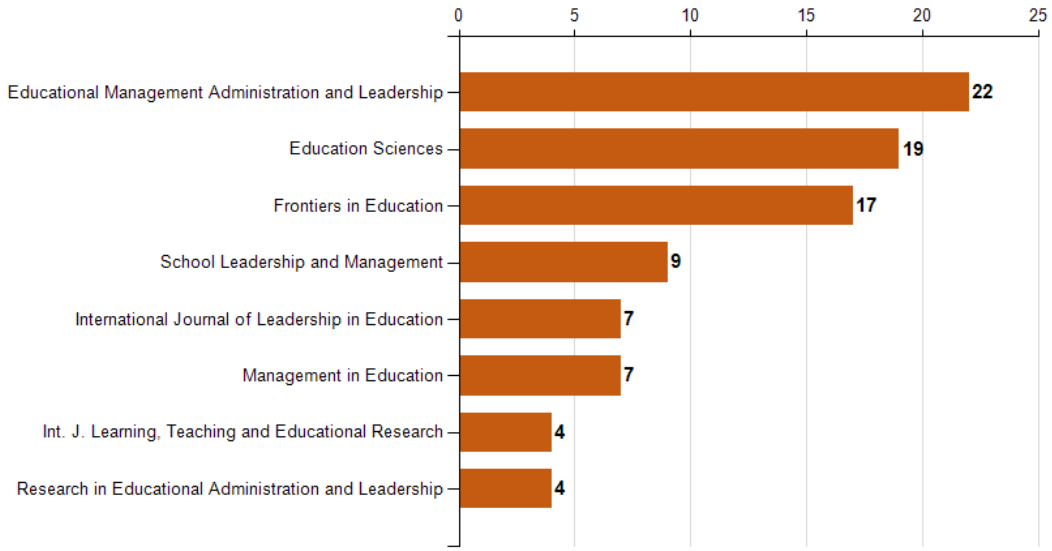


Figure 6. Journals with the largest number of publications.

The annual development of the number of documents in the top five sources is shown in Figure 7. Educational Management Administration and Leadership increased from nine documents in 2025 to 13 documents in 2026, making it the most active source in 2026. School Leadership and Management increased from three to six documents, and Frontiers in Education from eight to nine documents. Conversely, Education Sciences decreased slightly from 10 to nine documents, and the International Journal of Leadership in Education decreased from five to two documents. The numbers for both years in each source are the same as the totals in Figure 6, and the 2026 data are still preliminary.

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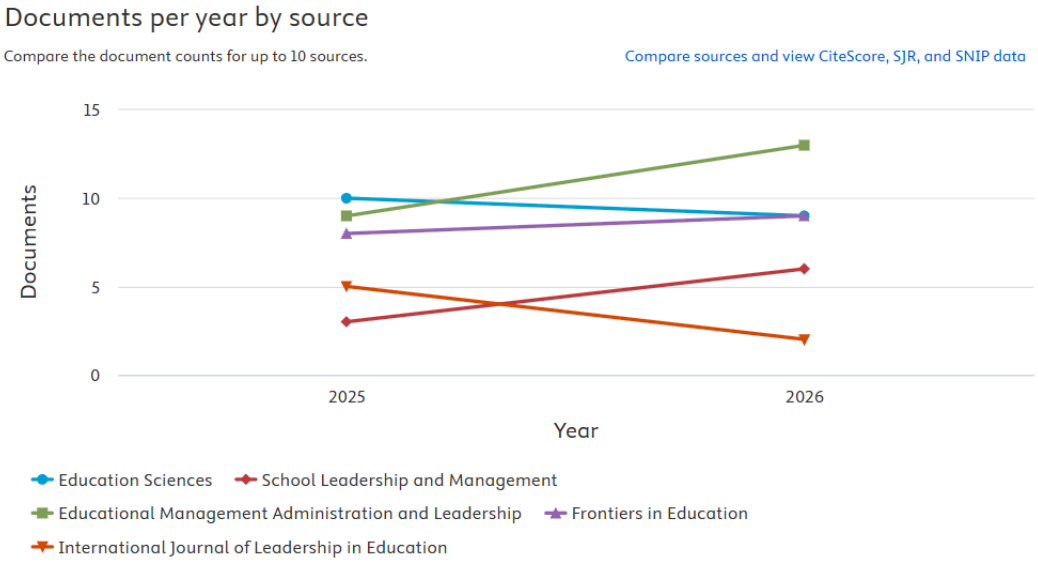


Figure 7. Number of documents per year according to the top five sources (source: Scopus, accessed November 10, 2026; 2026 data is still provisional).

Distribution by author

McKay, A. has five publications, followed by Adams, D., Berkovich, I., Gümüş, S., Lu, J., Pietsch, M., and Tahir, L.M. with four publications each, and Sharma, U. with three publications. This mapping helps identify active authors, but productivity does not directly indicate article quality, citation influence, or collaboration strength.

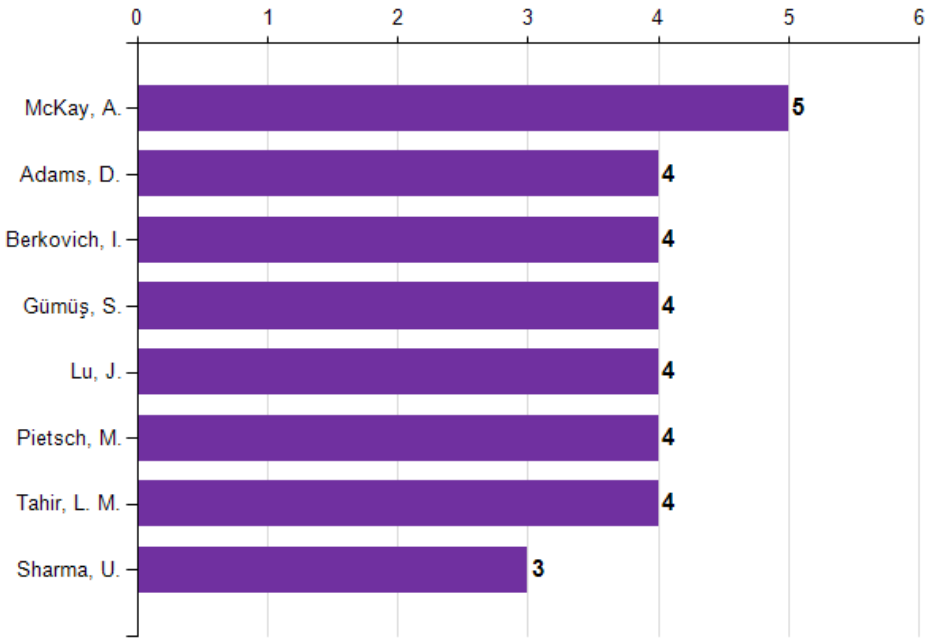


Figure 8. Authors with the most publications.

Distribution by Subject area

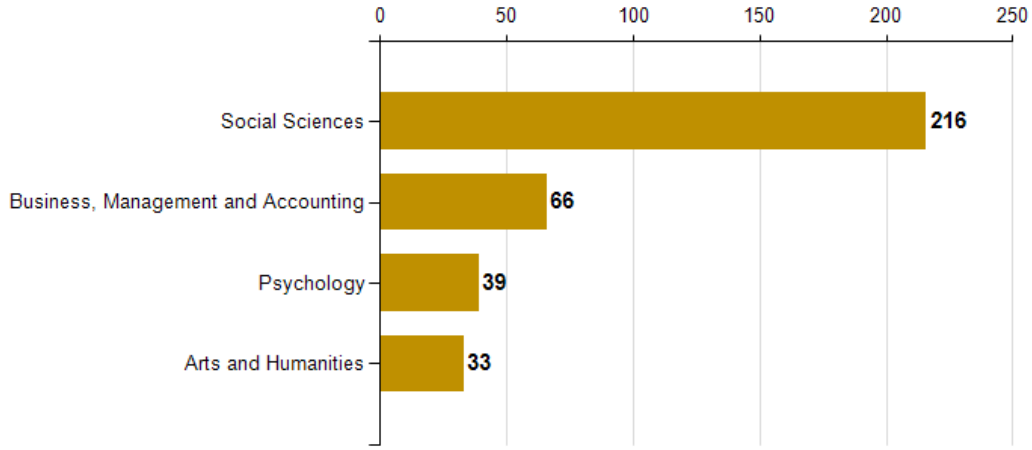


Figure 9. Distribution of documents by subject area in the 225 final articles (one document can be in more than one subject area).

Based on the subject area filter in Scopus, the final 225 articles were subject to Social Sciences dominance (216 documents), followed by Business, Management, and Accounting (66), Psychology (39), and Arts and Humanities (33). The dominance of social sciences is understandable because school leadership is part of educational studies, while the presence of management and psychology indicates that this topic is also studied from an organizational and behavioral perspective. Arts and Humanities emerged because the same articles were also recorded in the other selected subject areas.

RQ3: Key themes, trends, gaps, and research directions

Based on VOSviewer output, the keywords with the highest total link strength are "leadership" (26 occurrences; total link strength 91) and "school leadership" (48; 91), followed by "principals" (30; 77), "school leaders" (15; 45), "educational leadership" (21; 41), and "school principals" (17; 31). Prominent thematic keywords are "leadership coaching" (4; 26), "inclusive education" (7; 24), "professional learning" (6; 24), "professional development" (7; 23), "instructional leadership" (10; 21), and "transformational leadership" (9; 21). The VOSviewer map shows clusters of instructional leadership, professional development, social justice and inclusion, well-being (stress, mental health), and digital transformation and digital leadership.

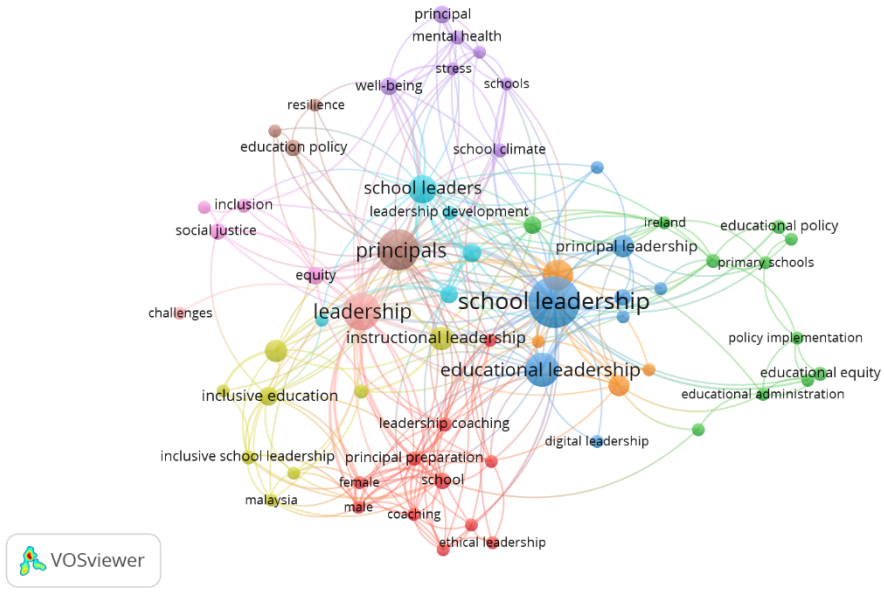


Figure 10. Keyword co-occurrence network map (VOSviewer): (a) map of all keywords; (b) map with 64 keywords, 10 clusters, 293 links, and a total link strength of 377.

Table 2. Ten thematic keywords with the highest total link strength (occurrences in parentheses); source: VOSviewer output, excluding generic terms (school, article, female, human, male).

Ranking	Keywords	Total link strength
1	Leadership (26)	91
2	School leadership (48)	91
3	Principals (30)	77
4	School leaders (15)	45
5	Educational leadership (21)	41
6	School principals (17)	31
7	Leadership coaching (4)	26
8	Inclusive education (7)	24
9	Professional learning (6)	24
10	Professional development (7)	23

The keyword map and table indicate that the research focuses on school leadership, instructional leadership, and transformational leadership. Based on matching author titles and keywords, the themes of professional development and professional learning appeared in 25 articles, inclusion in 21 articles, social justice and equity in 17 articles, digital in 15 articles, well-being, stress, and burnout in 11 articles, and COVID-19 in 9 articles. Artificial intelligence appeared in five articles and is a newly emerging theme.

The word "resistance" was not found in the authors' titles or keywords in the corpus. This suggests that teacher resistance to change, including digital change, was not yet an explicit theme in principals' publications during this period. This finding could provide a research opportunity: how principals manage digital resistance and build teacher commitment to change. Research gaps cannot be identified solely from keyword frequency; therefore, a thorough reading of the articles in the corpus is necessary, including the methods, population, context, and findings of each study.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study maps 225 Scopus articles on principals and school leaders in the 2025–2026 period (110 articles in 2025 and 115 articles in 2026, preliminary data). The United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, and Indonesia are the countries with the most contributions based on author affiliation. Publications are concentrated in Educational Management Administration and Leadership, Education Sciences, and Frontiers in Education, while the keywords school leadership, principals, educational leadership, and instructional leadership dominate the theme map.

Conceptually, these findings indicate that principal research encompasses leadership styles, professional development, well-being, inclusion and social justice, and digital technology and AI. For practice, these findings can inform the design of principal development programs that balance instructional, digital, and well-being competencies. Future research requires content studies on the effectiveness of principal development programs, digital leadership and AI, and managing teacher resistance to change.

There are several limitations. First, the data only includes English-language articles from Scopus from 2025–2026, so publications in other languages or other databases are not included. Second, the year 2026 is not final. Third, the interstage figures in the PRISMA diagram and VOSviewer parameters need to be matched with the original search logs and analysis projects. Fourth, the gap claim needs to be tested through full reading of the articles.

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