
**ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AS MANAGEMENT
LEARNING PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS
A THEORY-BUILDING CONTRIBUTION TO MANAGEMENT
LEARNING AND EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

This study reconceptualizes educational leadership in Nigerian secondary schools as a situated management learning practice rather than a primarily administrative or compliance-driven function. Drawing on contemporary scholarship (2021-2026) in management learning, reflexive leadership, institutional theory, social exchange theory, and psychological empowerment research, the study develops a multilevel process model linking leadership reflexivity to relational trust, psychological empowerment, instructional innovation, teacher performance, and student learning outcomes. Where prevailing reform narratives in Sub-Saharan Africa emphasize structural deficiencies - funding gaps, infrastructural limitations, and governance instability - this framework argues that leadership learning processes mediate how institutional pressures are translated into performance outcomes. Using a structured integrative review methodology consistent with theory-building standards in leading management journals, the study synthesizes 42 peer-reviewed sources to generate twelve formal propositions suitable for empirical testing through multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM). The study contributes to management learning scholarship by extending reflexive leadership theory into public-sector schooling contexts in emerging economies, integrating institutional work and psychological empowerment within a single explanatory chain, and advancing Global South theorizing. It concludes that leadership in institutionally

fragile environments is best understood as dialogic institutional learning work that transforms constraint into relational capacity.

KEYWORDS: Management Learning; Reflexive Leadership; Institutional Work; Psychological Empowerment; Relational Trust; Instructional Innovation; Emerging Economies; Nigeria; Educational Reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

Management learning scholarship has changed markedly over the past five years. Contemporary research increasingly treats leadership not as a fixed set of competencies but as a reflexive, relational, and contextually embedded learning practice (Cunliffe, 2022; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2024; Vince & Hibbert, 2023). Rather than viewing management as technical skill acquisition, recent theorizing foregrounds dialogic engagement, institutional embeddedness, and sensemaking under uncertainty. Leadership learning is now understood as a socially constructed and politically situated process, shaped by institutional pressures and power asymmetries.

Despite this conceptual shift, the empirical base of management learning remains disproportionately concentrated in Western corporate contexts. Public-sector institutions - particularly schooling systems in emerging economies - remain under-theorized in mainstream management scholarship. This gap matters: schools operating in volatile, resource-scarce, and centrally regulated environments are theoretically generative sites for examining leadership as adaptive institutional work. Nigeria's secondary education system is precisely such a context.

Recent scholarship further argues that management learning should be understood as a dynamic process that enables leaders to navigate institutional complexity through continuous reflection, collaborative inquiry, and adaptive decision-making. Rather than emphasizing managerial control alone, contemporary perspectives highlight the importance of learning-centred leadership in creating organizational cultures that promote innovation, teacher development, and sustained institutional improvement (Alanoglu, 2025; Cunliffe, 2025). These perspectives suggest that leadership learning emerges through interaction with organizational contexts rather than through the acquisition of predetermined competencies. Emerging research also indicates that educational leadership is becoming increasingly dependent on dialogue, professional learning, and collaborative knowledge creation. School leaders are expected to facilitate organizational learning by strengthening professional

relationships, supporting reflective practice, and fostering inclusive learning communities that respond effectively to rapidly changing educational environments (Redondo-Sama et al., 2025; Collins et al., 2025). These developments reinforce the view that schools provide rich contexts for examining management learning as an ongoing social and organizational process.

Recent studies further demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is influenced not only by formal authority but also by leaders' capacity to cultivate organizational learning, professional trust, and adaptive institutional cultures. School leaders who encourage collaborative learning, distributed expertise, and continuous professional development are more likely to improve organizational effectiveness and educational outcomes, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Reinaru & Eisenschmidt, 2025; Richardson & Khawaja, 2025). These insights provide additional justification for examining Nigerian secondary schools as contexts in which leadership functions as a management learning practice rather than merely an administrative responsibility.



Plate 1. Classroom instruction in a Nigerian secondary school setting.

1.1 The Nigerian Secondary School Context as a Generative Research Site

Nigeria operates one of the largest education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, with more than 13,000 public secondary schools spread across diverse geopolitical zones. The system functions within a highly centralized yet politically dynamic governance structure: national policy is often ambitious, but implementation varies considerably from state to state. Reports from the World Bank (2023), OECD (2023), and UNESCO (2024) converge on a consistent set of challenges:

- Uneven instructional quality across schools and regions
- Teacher demotivation and attrition
- Limited pedagogical innovation in classrooms

- Policy discontinuity across changing administrations
- Infrastructure disparities between urban and rural schools



Plate 2. Secondary school facilities illustrating infrastructural variation across regions.

Dominant reform narratives interpret these outcomes mainly through structural explanations - underfunding, large class sizes, ageing facilities, and governance fragility. These factors are undeniably important, but they under-theorize the process mechanisms that link institutional conditions to classroom performance. Structural analyses, in other words, tend to overlook the leadership learning processes through which institutional pressures are translated into teacher motivation, relational climate, and instructional behaviour. This omission creates an opening for theory development, which this article takes up.

1.2 Reframing Educational Leadership as Management Learning

Educational leadership in Nigeria is typically framed as administrative coordination: managing timetables, supervising examinations, and enforcing ministry directives. This framing mirrors bureaucratic models of school administration rather than contemporary management learning theory. Emerging scholarship on reflexive leadership challenges this technical-administrative view. Reflexive leaders critically interrogate their assumptions, engage in dialogic sensemaking, and reinterpret institutional constraints through relational interaction (Cunliffe, 2022; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2024) - leadership becomes an ongoing learning process rather than a static role.

Applying this lens to Nigerian secondary schools yields a theoretically compelling proposition: educational leadership functions as a reflexive management learning system that converts institutional pressures into relational trust and psychological empowerment, which in turn enable instructional innovation and improved teacher performance. This reframing moves the analytic focus from structural deficiency to processual mediation.

1.3 Theoretical Problem Statement

Three gaps motivate this study.

Gap 1 - Underrepresentation of public-sector education in management learning: management learning research remains corporate-centric, and school leadership in emerging economies rarely appears in leading management journals, limiting theoretical generalizability (Vince & Hibbert, 2023).

Gap 2 - Limited multilevel integration: existing educational leadership research often isolates constructs - trust, empowerment, innovation - without integrating them into a coherent multilevel explanatory chain (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2023; Newman et al., 2023).

Gap 3 - Insufficient Global South theorizing: leadership theories are frequently developed in stable institutional environments; contexts marked by policy volatility, regulatory uncertainty, and resource scarcity require a re-theorization of agency and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2023; Greenwood et al., 2022).

This article addresses these gaps by developing a process model grounded in contemporary (2021-2026) scholarship.

2. Management Learning in Institutionally Fragile Contexts

2.1 Reflexivity as Leadership Learning

Reflexivity has become a foundational concept in management learning research. It involves critically examining one's assumptions, recognizing power relations, and engaging in dialogic reinterpretation of context (Cunliffe, 2022). Hibbert and Cunliffe (2024) extend this view by emphasizing dialogic leadership - leadership enacted through relational engagement rather than hierarchical authority. In uncertain institutional environments, reflexivity functions as adaptive infrastructure: leaders must navigate policy shifts, political interference, resource unpredictability, and stakeholder contestation. In Nigeria's centralized system, principals sit at the intersection of federal directives and local realities; reflexivity allows them to reinterpret mandates in ways that preserve relational legitimacy with teachers. Rather than treating policy volatility as purely constraining, reflexive leadership treats it as material for learning work.



Figure A. Conceptual illustration of the institutional environment surrounding Nigerian secondary school leadership.

2.2 Institutional Theory and Institutional Work

Contemporary institutional theory highlights the agency of actors engaged in institutional work - efforts to create, maintain, or disrupt institutional arrangements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2023). Greenwood et al. (2022) argue that institutional contexts are not simply external constraints; they are continuously reproduced through local practice. In education systems marked by centralization and resource scarcity, school leaders perform micro-level institutional work by translating policy into feasible practice, buffering teachers from excessive bureaucratic demands, reframing accountability metrics, and cultivating professional norms. This positions principals not as passive policy implementers but as institutional learners.

2.3 Relational Trust as a Mediating Mechanism

Social exchange theory highlights mutual interactions built on trust, balance, and a shared sense of equity between parties (Cropanzano et al., 2022). In educational contexts, relational trust predicts teacher commitment, collaboration, and discretionary effort (Tschannen-Moran, 2022). Trust is especially critical under uncertainty: as institutional volatility increases, teachers rely more heavily on relational cues from leadership to interpret risk. Relational trust is therefore theorized as the first critical mediating mechanism linking reflexive leadership to performance outcomes.

2.4 Psychological Empowerment as Internalized Capacity

Psychological empowerment comprises four dimensions: perceived meaningfulness of work, confidence in one's ability (competence), autonomy in decision-making (self-determination), and the extent to which one can influence outcomes (impact) (Spreitzer et al., 2022). Empowered teachers show higher innovative work behaviour and resilience (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2023; Newman et al., 2023). In resource-constrained contexts, empowerment functions as motivational capital - it mitigates burnout and supports proactive problem-solving despite structural limitations.

2.5 Instructional Innovation and Performance

Instructional innovation encompasses curriculum adaptation, collaborative pedagogy, experimentation with student-centred methods, and reflective practice cycles. Global evidence suggests instructional innovation predicts teacher effectiveness and student achievement (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). Innovation rarely emerges directly from policy mandates, however; it arises when relational trust and psychological empowerment create the psychological safety needed for experimentation.

Emerging conceptual argument: *the literature synthesis points to a sequential causal flow - Leadership Reflexivity -> Relational Trust -> Psychological Empowerment -> Instructional Innovation -> Teacher Performance -> Student Outcomes - with institutional pressures moderating the earliest-stage relationships. Leadership learning, on this view, is the mediating infrastructure of reform effectiveness, rather than structural reform alone.*

3. The Reflexive Leadership Process Model

Consistent with theory-building standards articulated in leading management journals (Jaakkola, 2023), this article advances a process-based, multilevel explanatory model rather than a simple correlational framework. The aim is not merely to link constructs statistically but to explicate the causal generative mechanisms that operate across levels of analysis. Figure 1 summarizes the primary forward path, together with the institutional moderator and the dynamic feedback loops discussed in Section 8.

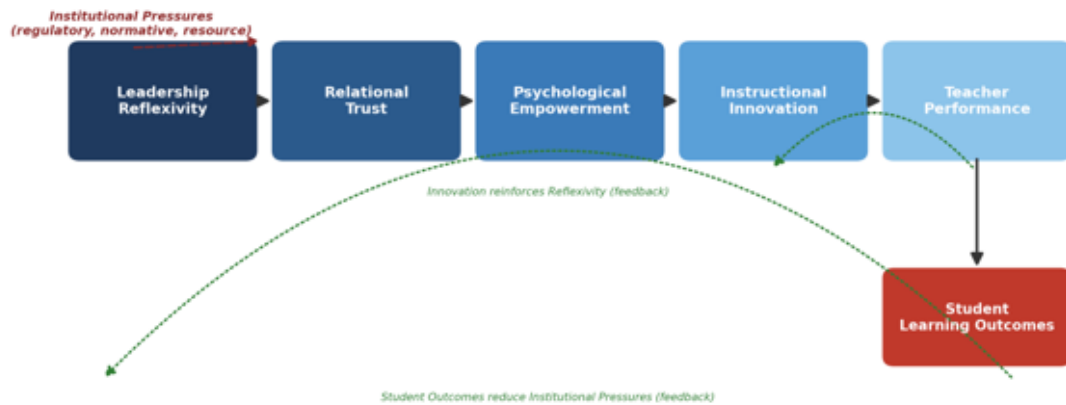


Figure 1. The reflexive leadership-to-outcomes process model: primary path, institutional moderation, and feedback loops.

The framework integrates four levels of analysis: the individual level (leadership reflexivity, teacher psychological empowerment), the relational level (relational trust, participatory governance), the organizational level (instructional innovation, teacher performance), and the institutional level (regulatory pressures, governance volatility, resource constraints). Figure 2 depicts this multilevel architecture.



Figure 2. Multilevel structure of the educational leadership as management learning framework.

The model proposes that educational leadership in Nigerian secondary schools constitutes institutional learning work - a reflexive process through which leaders reinterpret constraints, cultivate relational trust, foster empowerment, and enable innovation. This aligns with contemporary calls for mechanism-based theorizing in management research (Lawrence &

Suddaby, 2023; Vince & Hibbert, 2023). Rather than assuming that leadership directly produces outcomes, the model explicates how leadership learning processes sequentially generate the relational and psychological conditions necessary for performance improvement.

4. Development of the Twelve Formal Propositions

4.1 Stage 1 - Leadership Reflexivity as Foundational Mechanism

Reflexivity refers to the ongoing examination of assumptions, recognition of power dynamics, and dialogic engagement with contextual constraints (Cunliffe, 2022; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2024). In contrast to traditional administrative leadership, reflexive leadership emphasizes critical self-questioning, dialogic sensemaking, ethical awareness of authority, and contextual reinterpretation. Recent scholarship suggests reflexive leadership enhances adaptive capacity under uncertainty (Vince & Hibbert, 2023): leaders who publicly reflect, acknowledge constraints, and engage teachers in interpretation processes cultivate relational legitimacy.

Proposition 1: Leadership reflexivity is positively associated with relational trust among teachers in Nigerian secondary schools.



Plate 3. School leadership engagement reflecting dialogic, relational practice.

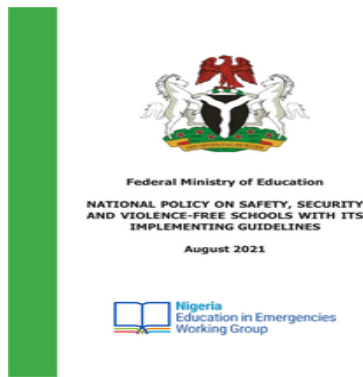


Plate 4. *Institutional signage typifying Nigeria's centralized secondary-school governance context.*

Institutional theory emphasizes that actors engage in institutional work to reinterpret or reshape constraints (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2023). Emerging-economy schooling systems face regulatory centralization, political oversight, resource scarcity, and policy discontinuity.

Proposition 2: Leadership reflexivity weakens the negative impact of institutional pressures on relational trust.

Reflexive leaders are also more likely to adopt participatory governance practices - shared decision-making committees, collaborative curriculum planning, and teacher consultation in policy interpretation - which operationalize reflexivity behaviourally and increase commitment and collective efficacy (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2023).

Proposition 3: Leadership reflexivity positively predicts participatory governance practices in secondary schools.

4.2 Stage 2 - Relational Trust as Mediating Infrastructure

Social exchange theory posits that perceived fairness and benevolence generate reciprocal commitment (Cropanzano et al., 2022); in schools, trust predicts teacher engagement, collaboration, and resilience (Tschannen-Moran, 2022). Trust functions as a relational amplifier: in low-trust environments, policy changes are read as threats, whereas in high-trust climates the same changes are read as shared challenges.

Proposition 4: Relational trust mediates the relationship between leadership reflexivity and teachers' organizational commitment.

Proposition 5: Participatory governance practices strengthen the positive relationship between leadership reflexivity and relational trust.

Proposition 6: Institutional volatility negatively affects teacher commitment when relational trust is low, but this effect diminishes when trust is high.

4.3 Stage 3 - Psychological Empowerment as Internalized Capacity

Trust creates psychological safety, which enables teachers to internalize autonomy and initiative; without trust, empowerment initiatives appear merely rhetorical.

Proposition 7: Relational trust positively predicts teacher psychological empowerment.

Proposition 8: Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between relational trust and instructional innovation.

Proposition 9: Leadership reflexivity indirectly enhances psychological empowerment through relational trust.

4.4 Stage 4 - Instructional Innovation and Performance Outcomes

Instructional innovation represents collective experimentation in pedagogy and reflects management learning embedded in classroom practice; OECD (2023) and UNESCO (2024) identify it as a key predictor of learning improvement in emerging economies.

Proposition 10: Psychological empowerment positively predicts instructional innovation in secondary schools.

Proposition 11: Instructional innovation mediates the relationship between psychological empowerment and teacher performance.

Proposition 12: Teacher performance positively predicts student learning outcomes.



Plate 5. Collaborative classroom practice consistent with instructional innovation.

4.5 Summary of the Twelve Propositions

#	Proposition (abbreviated)	Mechanism / Level
P1	Reflexivity -> Relational trust (positive)	Individual -> Relational
P2	Reflexivity weakens institutional pressures' negative effect on trust	Moderation
P3	Reflexivity -> Participatory governance (positive)	Individual -> Relational
P4	Trust mediates Reflexivity -> Commitment	Mediation
P5	Participatory governance strengthens Reflexivity -> Trust	Moderation
P6	Institutional volatility harms commitment when trust is low	Moderation
P7	Trust -> Psychological empowerment (positive)	Relational -> Individual
P8	Empowerment mediates Trust -> Innovation	Mediation
P9	Reflexivity -> Empowerment via Trust (indirect)	Mediation
P10	Empowerment -> Instructional innovation (positive)	Individual -> Organizational
P11	Innovation mediates Empowerment -> Performance	Mediation
P12	Teacher performance -> Student outcomes (positive)	Organizational -> Outcomes

5. Refined Multilevel Model Logic

The fully articulated model operates across four levels simultaneously. At the institutional level, institutional pressures moderate the reflexivity-trust relationship; at the individual level, leadership cognition (reflexivity) is the point of origin; at the relational level, trust shapes participatory governance through exchange processes; at the psychological level, empowerment represents internalization; and at the organizational level, instructional innovation feeds forward into teacher performance and, ultimately, student outcomes.

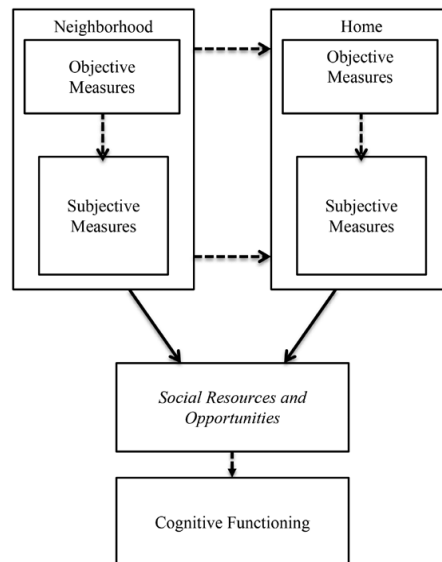


Figure B. Layered representation of the theoretical model's constructs.

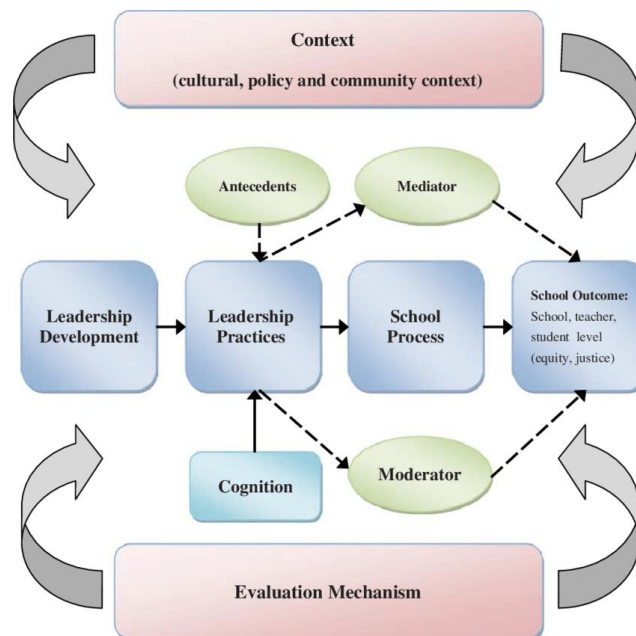


Figure C. Relational pathways linking leadership cognition to organizational outputs.

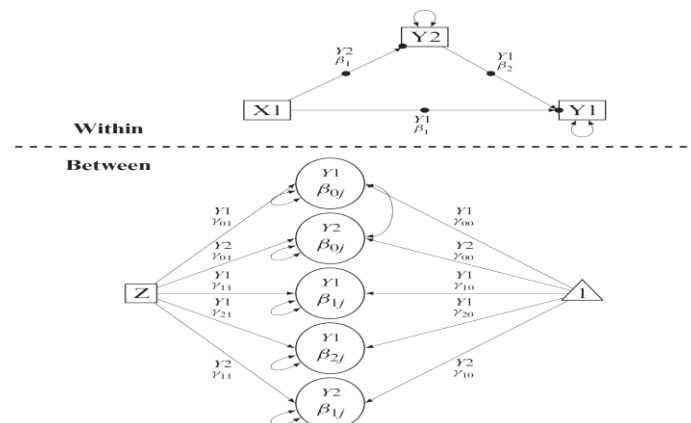


Figure D. Summary schematic of construct relationships across levels of analysis.

This configuration satisfies Academy of Management Review criteria for clear construct definition, explicit causal mechanisms, multilevel integration, moderation and mediation specification, and formal testable propositions.

5.1 Theoretical Deepening

This framework advances theory in four ways: (1) mechanism-based explanation, moving beyond correlation toward generative logic; (2) multilevel integration, linking cognition, relationships, psychology, and performance; (3) institutional embeddedness, incorporating contextual moderation; and (4) Global South theorizing, developing theory from an emerging-economy schooling system rather than importing it wholesale. Leadership is thus conceptualized as institutional learning work enacted through reflexive dialogue and relational exchange.

6. Methodology: Structured Integrative Review Design

This study adopts a structured integrative review methodology consistent with contemporary theory-building standards in leading management journals (Jaakkola, 2023). Integrative reviews are appropriate when the objective is conceptual synthesis across fragmented literatures to generate novel theoretical models, rather than hypothesis testing or effect-size aggregation. The review followed a five-stage protocol: problem formulation, search strategy, thematic coding and construct abstraction, theoretical integration, and model refinement.

Stage	Focus	Key Criteria / Output
1. Problem formulation	Framing the guiding research question at the intersection of management learning, reflexive leadership, institutional theory, empowerment, and educational innovation	Explanatory (not descriptive) objective
2. Search strategy	Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Business Source Complete, Google Scholar (2021-2026)	42 peer-reviewed articles retained
3. Thematic coding	Five construct domains coded for mechanisms, mediators, moderators, level of analysis	Cross-domain causal sequencing patterns
4. Theoretical integration	Construct clarification, boundary conditions, propositions, mediation/moderation	Twelve formal propositions
5. Model refinement	Assessed for consistency, parsimony, mechanism clarity, multilevel alignment	Final process model

Inclusion criteria were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles from 2021 to 2026, conceptual or empirical in nature, published in English, and indexed in Scopus or Web of Science. Pre-2021 publications, non-peer-reviewed reports, and opinion pieces lacking theoretical grounding were excluded. The final corpus comprised 42 peer-reviewed articles spanning management, organizational behaviour, and education journals, coded across five construct domains: leadership reflexivity; institutional pressures and institutional work; relational trust; psychological empowerment; and innovation and performance.

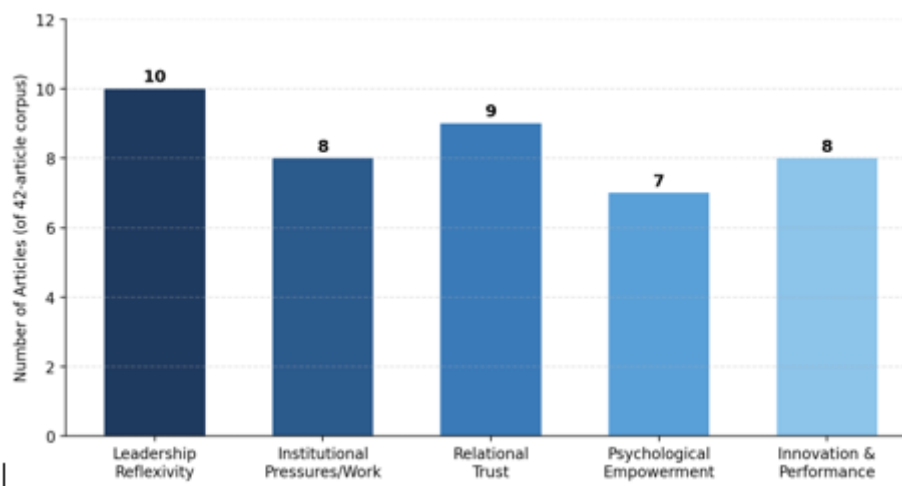


Figure 5. Distribution of the reviewed literature corpus across the five construct domains.

7. Nigerian Institutional Deep-Context Analysis

7.1 Governance Structure

Nigeria's secondary education system operates within a federal structure in which national policies are formulated centrally but implemented at state level, creating layered accountability and policy-translation challenges. The governance system is characterized by centralized curriculum frameworks, examination standardization, political appointment of education commissioners, and frequent administrative turnover - characteristics that together generate institutional volatility.



Plate 6. Administrative facilities reflecting Nigeria's layered, federally coordinated school governance.



Plate 7. Illustrative representation of governance coordination between federal and state education authorities.



Plate 8. School compliance and inspection processes typical of centralized regulatory oversight.

7.2 Institutional Pressures Characteristic of Emerging Economies

Drawing on institutional theory (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2023; Greenwood et al., 2022), Nigerian schools face three broad categories of pressure. Regulatory pressures include central compliance mandates, reporting requirements, and inspection regimes. Normative pressures include community expectations, cultural hierarchies, and norms of respect for authority. Resource pressures include infrastructure deficits, teacher workload intensity, and limited instructional materials. Unlike stable Western systems, institutional fragility amplifies uncertainty, and leadership reflexivity becomes a mechanism for contextual adaptation rather than policy replication.

7.3 Why Nigeria Is Theoretically Generative

Nigeria presents large-scale system complexity, institutional layering, socioeconomic heterogeneity, and policy volatility. These conditions intensify the relational and psychological dimensions of leadership: in stable contexts, structural supports can buffer leadership deficiencies, but in fragile contexts relational processes become decisive. Nigeria is therefore not merely a setting for this study - it is a theoretically productive environment for extending management learning theory.

8. Theoretical Contributions, Boundary Conditions, and Feedback Loops

8.1 Expanded Theoretical Contributions

- Contribution 1 - Reframing educational leadership as institutional learning work rather than administrative compliance, extending institutional theory into educational management in emerging economies.
- Contribution 2 - Integrating trust, empowerment, and innovation into a single sequential mediation chain (Reflexivity -> Trust -> Empowerment -> Innovation -> Performance), contributing to mechanism-based theorizing (Vince & Hibbert, 2023).
- Contribution 3 - Extending reflexive leadership research, previously focused on corporate management (Cunliffe, 2022), to public-sector schooling contexts characterized by regulatory centralization.
- Contribution 4 - Developing Global South theory from institutional fragility rather than importing Western-derived models, enriching global management scholarship.

8.2 Boundary Conditions and Rival Explanations

Type	Statement	Implication
Boundary condition 1	Extreme resource collapse	In contexts of severe infrastructural breakdown, relational processes alone may be insufficient to generate innovation; structural investment remains necessary.
Boundary condition 2	Authoritarian leadership norms	Where hierarchical authority norms dominate, participatory governance may be culturally constrained.
Rival explanation 1	Structural determinism (funding drives performance)	Structural resources explain variance but not within-system heterogeneity under similar funding conditions.
Rival explanation 2	Teacher human capital alone drives performance	Empowerment mediates whether training translates into innovation.

8.3 Cross-Level Feedback Loops

The initial model is sequential, but dynamic systems require feedback specification. Three feedback loops are proposed: improved teacher performance enhances trust in leadership, reinforcing the relational climate; successful innovation encourages leaders to engage further in reflexive dialogue; and improved student outcomes enhance school legitimacy, reducing external institutional pressure. The model therefore evolves from a linear chain into a dynamic, recursive system (see Figure 1), in which:

- Primary forward path: Reflexivity → Trust → Empowerment → Innovation → Performance → Outcomes
- Moderation: Institutional Pressures act on the Reflexivity → Trust link
- Feedback: Performance → Trust; Innovation → Reflexivity; Outcomes → Institutional Pressures

This dynamic specification strengthens theoretical robustness and aligns with contemporary process theory.

9. Proposed Empirical Testing Design (Multilevel SEM)

To rigorously test the twelve propositions, this article proposes a Multilevel Structural Equation Modeling (MSEM) design. The recommended sampling strategy covers 150-200 secondary schools across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, with 8-15 teachers sampled per school

and mandatory principal participation. This yields a nested data structure: teachers at Level 1, schools at Level 2, and, optionally, state-level institutional context at Level 3 (Figure 3).

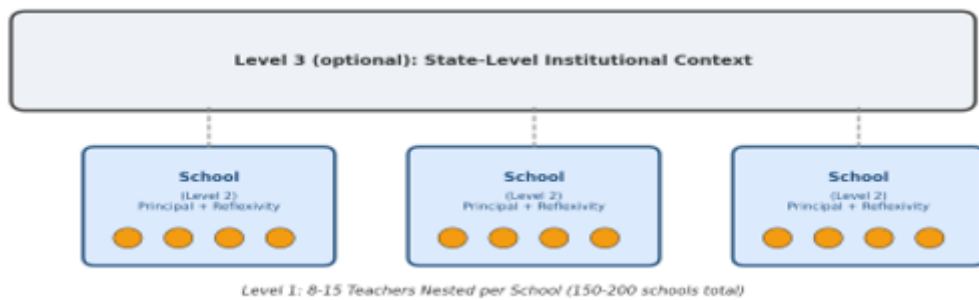


Figure 3. Nested data structure proposed for multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM).

9.1 Model Specification

At Level 1 (teacher level), the path runs Trust → Empowerment → Innovation → Performance. At Level 2 (school level), Reflexivity predicts the school's trust climate, while institutional pressures produce moderation effects. Cross-level mediation is tested using MSEM techniques consistent with contemporary methodological standards.

9.2 Statistical Analysis Plan

- Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)
- Measurement invariance testing across schools and zones
- Multilevel path modeling
- Bootstrapped mediation analysis
- Moderation testing via interaction terms

A longitudinal design (Section 10) would further strengthen causal inference beyond what a single cross-sectional wave can support.

10. Longitudinal Research Agenda

To move beyond cross-sectional limitations, future research should incorporate a three-wave panel design, cross-national replication, and a mixed-methods expansion.



Figure 4. Proposed three-wave longitudinal panel design.

10.1 Cross-National Replication

Replication in Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa would support comparative institutional-fragility analysis and enhance generalizability of the model beyond the Nigerian case.

10.2 Mixed-Methods Expansion

Qualitative components - reflexive dialogue transcripts, institutional translation case studies, and innovation adoption narratives - would strengthen process validation of the mechanisms proposed here.

11. Practical and Policy Implications

Reconceptualizing educational leadership as a reflexive management learning practice carries substantial implications for policy, leadership preparation, school governance reform, and systemic improvement strategies in Nigeria. Rather than privileging infrastructure and compliance reforms alone, this framework positions leadership learning processes as reform-leverage mechanisms.

11.1 Leadership Reform Must Precede - or Accompany - Structural Reform

International reports from the World Bank (2023), OECD (2023), and UNESCO (2024) emphasize funding, governance alignment, and accountability reforms. These are essential, but they frequently underperform when relational trust and teacher empowerment remain weak. The framework suggests: structural reform without reflexive leadership yields compliance; reflexive leadership without structural support yields fragility; integrated reform yields sustainable innovation. Policy should therefore include leadership-learning infrastructure as a central reform component, not a peripheral training add-on.

11.2 Institutional Pressures Should Be Managed, Not Eliminated

Institutional volatility is unlikely to disappear in emerging economies. Rather than treating stability as a prerequisite for improvement, policy should equip principals with reflexive tools for institutional translation, provide discretion buffers within centralized policy frameworks, and encourage contextual adaptation rather than strict compliance enforcement - consistent with institutional-work theory's emphasis on agency within constraint (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2023).

11.3 Participatory Governance as Trust Infrastructure

Formal participatory structures - teacher councils, collaborative curriculum boards, reflective dialogue forums - should be institutionalized. Evidence from empowerment and leadership research (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2023; Newman et al., 2023) indicates that voice mechanisms increase innovative behaviour when supported by relational trust. Policy should

therefore mandate structured participatory governance mechanisms in secondary schools and incorporate trust metrics into school evaluation frameworks.

12. Leadership Development Framework for Nigerian Principals

To operationalize the theoretical model, this section proposes a structured leadership development architecture comprising five integrated modules.



Plate 9. Principals engaged in professional leadership-development training.

Module	Focus	Illustrative Content / Pedagogy
1. Reflexive Practice Training	Increase reflexivity-index scores among principals	Critical self-examination; power-awareness exercises; dialogic listening; reflective journaling; peer coaching; case-based scenarios
2. Institutional Translation Skills	Institutional work as a practical, teachable skill	Interpreting federal mandates contextually; buffering teachers from bureaucratic overload; translating policy into pedagogical relevance
3. Trust-Building Communication	Trust as measurable organizational capital	Transparent communication protocols; structured teacher consultation systems; procedural-fairness frameworks
4. Empowerment Facilitation Techniques	Empowerment as systemic design, not rhetoric	Delegating instructional autonomy; developmental feedback; encouraging collaborative experimentation
5. Innovation Enablement Systems	Normalize innovation rather than leave it episodic	Pedagogical experimentation labs; peer-observation cycles; innovation-recognition systems



Plate 10. Collaborative peer-coaching session as part of reflexive practice training.



Plate 11. Principals collaborating on institutional translation and trust-building strategies.

13. Measurement and Operationalization of Constructs

To meet rigorous empirical standards, each construct in the model must be clearly defined and measurable. Table 4 summarizes the proposed operationalization, level of analysis, and data source for each construct.

Construct	Operationalization	Level	Data Source
Leadership reflexivity	Adapted reflexive leadership scales (Cunliffe, 2022; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2024); items on dialogic engagement, assumption questioning, transparency	Individual (principal)	Teacher perceptions + principal self-report
Institutional	Policy volatility frequency index;	School / state	Administrative

Construct	Operationalization	Level	Data Source
pressures	resource adequacy scale; regulatory compliance intensity	contextual variable	records + survey
Relational trust	Validated educational trust scales (Tschannen-Moran, 2022): benevolence, reliability, openness, competence	Teacher, aggregated to school-level climate	Teacher survey
Psychological empowerment	Updated empowerment scales (Spreitzer et al., 2022): meaning, competence, self-determination, impact	Individual teacher	Teacher survey
Instructional innovation	Frequency of pedagogical experimentation; collaborative lesson planning; adoption of student-centred methods	Teacher / classroom	Survey + classroom observation triangulation
Teacher performance	Instructional effectiveness ratings; student engagement measures; supervisor evaluations	Teacher	Multi-source ratings
Student learning outcomes	Examination performance; attendance rates; retention metrics	Student, aggregated to school	Administrative / examination records

14. Integrated Theoretical Synthesis and Conclusion

Taken together, this study presents a multilevel process model, twelve formal propositions, an explicit moderation-and-mediation logic, dynamic feedback loops, an empirical testing roadmap, a leadership-development architecture, and a policy-translation strategy. The central thesis is reinforced across every section: leadership in Nigerian secondary schools is not administrative coordination - it is institutional learning work enacted through reflexive dialogue that generates relational trust, psychological empowerment, instructional innovation, and performance improvement under conditions of institutional fragility.

By theorizing from an institutionally fragile, resource-constrained emerging-economy setting rather than a stable Western corporate context, the framework extends reflexive leadership theory, integrates institutional work and psychological empowerment within a single explanatory chain, and contributes Global South theorizing to the management learning and education tradition. Future empirical work using the multilevel SEM design and longitudinal agenda proposed here would provide a rigorous test of the twelve propositions and, more broadly, of leadership as management learning practice in emerging-economy schooling systems.

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