Bounded Leadership and Politics of Educational Management: Bureaucracy and Agency at Secondary Schools in Bangladesh Secondary Schools

Dr. Md. Atiqul Islam Pathan[1]
Golam Rasul Suny[2]
Khandoker Md. Maruf[3]

Abstract

This study offers a critical examination of headteachers' leadership practices in Bangladesh's non-government secondary schools, which comprise nearly 97% of the nation's secondary education sector. Drawing on survey data from 60 respondents across 20 schools, the research reveals that leadership remains predominantly hierarchical and compliance-driven. Despite headteachers' awareness of their instructional responsibilities, their agency is constrained by bureaucratic structures, political interference, and limited institutional autonomy. Administrative routines and external accountability mechanisms overshadow pedagogical leadership, reproducing a managerial rather than transformative culture. Through the lens of critical and postcolonial leadership theories, the study conceptualises this dynamic as a form of bounded leadership—negotiated within intersecting bureaucratic, cultural, and political pressures. The findings highlight a disjunction between decentralisation policy rhetoric and the persistence of control-oriented governance practices. The paper argues that leadership reform in the Global South requires contextual, ethical, and collaborative approaches that move beyond managerialism toward social justice and sustainability. It calls for future research employing ethnographic and comparative methods to examine how educational leaders in resource-constrained systems negotiate agency, authority, and reform amid persistent structural asymmetries.

Keywords: Bounded leadership; Educational management; Headteachers' agency; Bureaucracy and governance; Bangladesh secondary education

[1] Director, Research & Documentation, National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM), Dhaka, Bangladesh
[2] Associate Professor, Dhaka Mohanagar Mohila College, Dhaka, Bangladesh
[3] Academic Supervisor, DSHE, District Education Office, Dhaka
*Corresponding Author: atiquepathan2015@gmail.com

Introduction

Leadership in education is widely acknowledged as one of the most influential factors shaping school effectiveness, teacher motivation, and learner achievement (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallinger, 2018). Yet, what constitutes *effective* leadership remains contextually contingent and socially constructed. In many developing countries, including Bangladesh, school leadership unfolds within systems marked by resource scarcity, policy ambiguity, and sociopolitical interference (Harris, 2021; Haque et al., 2021; Milon, 2016; Al Nahar et al., 2024). Within this milieu, the head teacher's role is both pivotal and paradoxical—pivotal because their leadership directly affects teaching quality and school governance, and paradoxical because they often operate with limited authority and professional support (Rahman & Akter, 2022). Understanding this complexity is crucial to interrogating the dynamics of educational quality, accountability, and reform in the non-government secondary school sector.

Globally, the concept of school leadership has shifted from bureaucratic administration to instructional and transformational paradigms that emphasize vision-building, pedagogical guidance, and participatory management (Alam et al., 2018, 2021, 2025; Bush, 2020; Day & Sammons, 2016). Instructional leadership, in particular, positions headteachers as key agents in improving classroom teaching and learning by fostering professional dialogue, supervising instruction, and sustaining a culture of continuous improvement (Hallinger, 2018; Robinson et al., 2008). However, these global discourses often overlook contextual realities of the Global South, where educational leadership operates within asymmetrical power relations, donor-driven reforms, and neoliberal accountability regimes (Tikly, 2020; Male & Palaiologou, 2019). As a result, leadership models developed in Western settings are frequently transplanted into vastly different educational ecologies without adequate consideration of local socio-cultural logics or institutional constraints.

In Bangladesh, leadership in secondary education is deeply entangled with the colonial legacy of bureaucratic control, politicisation of education, and chronic underinvestment in teacher professional development (Sultana, 2020; Kabir & Chowdhury, 2020). Approximately 97% of secondary schools are non-government, and most are partially funded through state subsidies under the Monthly Pay Order (MPO) scheme. While this system enables broad access, it also produces a hybrid governance structure where headteachers must navigate tensions between government regulations, community expectations, and local politics (Karim, 2021). Their capacity to provide visionary, instructional, and ethical leadership is frequently undermined by administrative overload, inadequate training, and constrained decision-making power. Consequently, leadership in non-government schools often remains managerial rather than pedagogical—a condition that reproduces inefficiencies in teaching and learning (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2022; Milon et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Research on school leadership in Bangladesh remains limited and largely descriptive, focusing on headteachers' responsibilities rather than interrogating the systemic conditions

that shape their practices (Haque et al., 2021). Few studies engage critically with how social hierarchies, gender dynamics, or patron-client relationships influence leadership enactment. Moreover, professional development initiatives for headteachers have been sporadic and primarily donor-driven, often failing to address context-specific needs or promote reflexive, practice-oriented learning (UNESCO, 2018; Rahman, 2019). This epistemic gap reflects a broader issue in educational research where leadership is examined as a technical skill rather than a sociocultural and political process. As Gronn (2015) and Fullan (2019) argue, leadership must be theorised as an evolving relational practice that is contextually situated and morally purposeful—an understanding still emerging in Bangladeshi scholarship.

Given these complexities, there is a pressing need to re-examine headteachers' leadership within Bangladesh's non-government secondary schools through a critical and context-sensitive lens. This study seeks to explore how headteachers interpret and enact their leadership roles across instructional, managerial, and financial domains. It interrogates the structural and attitudinal barriers that constrain effective leadership and analyses how these challenges influence school performance. In doing so, it situates leadership not merely as an individual capacity but as a socially mediated process shaped by institutional arrangements, policy frameworks, and community expectations.

This investigation aligns with the broader educational reform agenda articulated in Bangladesh's *National Education Policy 2010* and *Vision 2041*, as well as the global commitment to *Sustainable Development Goal 4* (SDG 4), which emphasises inclusive and equitable quality education. Strengthening headteachers' leadership capacity is indispensable for achieving these goals, as leadership mediates the translation of policy into classroom practice (Bush, 2020; Pont et al., 2021). By critically examining existing practices and their constraints, this study aims to generate insights that inform leadership development programs, policy formulation, and institutional reform. Ultimately, it argues that improving leadership in non-government secondary schools is not merely an administrative necessity but a transformative imperative for ensuring educational quality, equity, and sustainability in Bangladesh.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualising Educational Leadership

Educational leadership has evolved beyond the narrow confines of managerialism to encompass moral, instructional, and transformational dimensions. Early leadership theories drew from industrial models that emphasised authority, control, and efficiency (Bush, 2020; Milon & Ali, 2023). However, subsequent scholarship reconceptualised leadership as a process of influence that mobilises teachers, learners, and communities toward shared educational goals (Leithwood et al., 2020; Gronn, 2015). Among the multiple theoretical perspectives, *instructional leadership* and *transformational leadership* have become the most influential in educational research and practice.

Instructional leadership highlights the head teacher's central role in improving teaching and learning. Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) model identified three core dimensions—defining the school mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive learning climate. Later, Robinson et al. (2008) empirically demonstrated that instructional leadership has a stronger impact on student outcomes than transformational leadership, as it directly influences pedagogical quality. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, focuses on inspiring teachers through vision, trust, and professional empowerment (Day & Sammons, 2016). While both paradigms aim to enhance school performance, scholars such as Harris (2021) and Hallinger (2018) caution against uncritical application of Western-centric models in Global South contexts where sociocultural hierarchies and bureaucratic constraints shape leadership enactment.

2.2 Leadership as a Contextual and Political Practice

Recent critical literature recognises that leadership cannot be divorced from the social, cultural, and political contexts in which it is embedded (Ball, 2012; Tikly, 2020). In the Global South, educational leadership is often mediated by systemic inequalities, centralised governance, and donor-driven policy agendas that limit local agency (Male & Palaiologou, 2019; Bush & Ng, 2019). As Harris (2021) observes, the "imported orthodoxy" of Western leadership frameworks often ignores contextual complexities such as patron–client relations, gendered power structures, and the politicisation of education.

From a critical standpoint, leadership should be conceptualised as *relational practice* rather than positional authority (Gronn, 2015). This perspective aligns with distributed and participatory models that emphasise collaboration and shared responsibility (Spillane, 2006). Yet, in many developing nations, hierarchical organisational cultures continue to privilege command-and-control models of management. Consequently, headteachers' capacity to foster teacher agency, engage communities, and innovate pedagogically is frequently undermined (Pont et al., 2021).

2.3 Global Evidence on Headteachers' Leadership and School Effectiveness

Empirical studies from diverse contexts consistently demonstrate the correlation between effective leadership and improved school outcomes. For instance, Leithwood et al. (2020) reaffirmed that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching in its impact on student learning. Hallinger (2018) also found that successful headteachers create cultures of trust, professional learning, and accountability. Moreover, research in East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa underscores that leadership practices are most effective when they are contextually adapted, participatory, and ethically grounded (Bush, 2020; Harris, 2021).

Nevertheless, global evidence reveals persistent tensions between managerial accountability and pedagogical leadership. Market-driven reforms—characterised by performance audits and standardised testing—have often reduced leadership to administrative compliance rather than instructional improvement (Ball, 2012). Critical scholars argue that this neoliberal framing erodes the moral and community-oriented purpose of education

(Tikly, 2020; Fullan, 2019). This critique is particularly relevant for South Asian contexts where policy reforms tend to emulate Western accountability models without addressing structural inequalities or the socio-economic realities of schools.

2.4 Educational Leadership in Bangladesh: Policy and Practice

In Bangladesh, secondary education operates through a dual system of government and non-government institutions, the latter accounting for approximately 97 percent of all schools (BANBEIS, 2022). Headteachers in these non-government schools hold a complex position at the intersection of public accountability and community management. Although the *National Education Policy 2010* emphasises the need for leadership development and decentralised governance, practical implementation remains weak (Sultana, 2020).

Studies have identified several challenges in school leadership in Bangladesh: inadequate professional training, politicised recruitment, bureaucratic control, and limited autonomy (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2020; Karim, 2021). Rahman and Akter (2022) note that headteachers often lack opportunities for formal leadership preparation, leading to reliance on traditional managerial styles rather than reflective, data-informed decision-making. Furthermore, the financial dependence of non-government schools on the Monthly Pay Order (MPO) system subjects them to political interference, reducing headteachers' authority over staffing and budgeting (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2022).

Gender also intersects with leadership capacity. Although female participation in headship has increased, many female leaders face cultural constraints, limited mobility, and resistance from male colleagues (Sultana, 2020). This mirrors broader gendered hierarchies in South Asian societies that restrict women's decision-making power in public institutions. Consequently, leadership in Bangladesh's secondary schools remains heavily masculinised and bureaucratically embedded rather than collaborative or instructional.

2.5 Leadership Development and Capacity Building

Professional development initiatives for school leaders in Bangladesh have been sporadic and externally driven. Programs implemented by the National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM) and development partners such as UNESCO and DFID have primarily focused on administrative efficiency rather than pedagogical or transformational competencies (UNESCO, 2018; Rahman, 2019). These initiatives often adopt short-term, training-based approaches that fail to produce sustained professional learning communities. As Haque et al. (2021) argue, leadership development in Bangladesh must move beyond technical training toward reflective, practice-based mentorship that acknowledges contextual realities.

Comparatively, successful models in other developing contexts—such as Kenya's head teacher mentorship programs and Singapore's leadership pipelines—illustrate that long-term, system-wide investment in leadership capacity can enhance school performance (Pont et al., 2021). Bangladesh, however, continues to lack a coherent framework that integrates leadership preparation, career progression, and accountability mechanisms. This absence contributes to a reactive rather than proactive culture of school management, where headteachers are administrators rather than visionary leaders.

2.6 Identified Research Gaps and Critical Perspective

Despite an emerging body of work, research on educational leadership in Bangladesh remains largely descriptive, focusing on job roles rather than the socio-political and moral dimensions of leadership (Haque et al., 2021; Sultana, 2020). Few studies examine how headteachers negotiate competing expectations between state, community, and donor agencies or how leadership practices influence teacher identity, professional culture, and student outcomes. Moreover, existing research rarely interrogates the epistemological assumptions underlying "effective leadership," which are often borrowed from Eurocentric paradigms (Tikly, 2020).

Therefore, there is a need for more critical, context-sensitive scholarship that situates leadership within the broader struggles for educational justice, equity, and sustainability in the Global South. This study addresses these gaps by examining the leadership practices of headteachers in non-government secondary schools in Bangladesh through instructional, managerial, and financial lenses. It positions leadership as a socially situated process shaped by structural constraints, professional agency, and moral purpose, thereby contributing to the decolonisation of educational leadership research in South Asia.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, descriptive research design to explore the leadership practices of headteachers in non-government secondary schools in Bangladesh. The choice of a descriptive survey design was guided by the study's aim to obtain a holistic understanding of how headteachers perform their instructional, managerial, and financial leadership roles within institutional and systemic constraints. Quantitative description allows researchers to capture patterns and perceptions from multiple stakeholders while maintaining objectivity in data interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Milon et al., 2023). This approach was deemed appropriate given the study's intent to examine current practices rather than test causal hypotheses. It enabled systematic investigation of the relationships among leadership roles, institutional context, and performance outcomes, thereby offering evidence-based insights into the challenges of school leadership in Bangladesh's non-government education sector.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The study involved a total of 60 participants drawn from 20 non-government secondary schools across Bangladesh. These participants included 20 headteachers, 20 classroom or assistant teachers, and 20 members of the School Management Committees (SMCs). The schools were selected purposively to ensure representation from diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts, including urban, semi-urban, and rural settings. Purposive sampling was justified by the need to engage participants who were directly involved in the governance and leadership of secondary schools, and who possessed relevant experience

and insights into institutional practices (Alam et al., 2024; Milon, 2020; Milon et al., 2017; Etikan et al., 2016). Headteachers were selected based on a minimum of five years of leadership experience, ensuring they had substantial exposure to the managerial and pedagogical dimensions of school operations. Teachers and SMC members were included to provide complementary perspectives on the effectiveness and inclusivity of leadership practices. This triangulated respondent structure allowed for a multi-layered analysis of leadership, combining insider and outsider viewpoints within each school context.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection Procedure

Three structured questionnaires were developed for the respective respondent groups. The instruments were designed based on established frameworks of educational leadership (Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020), and contextualised for Bangladesh's socio-institutional realities. Each questionnaire contained sections addressing demographic information, institutional characteristics, and items relating to leadership performance across instructional, managerial, financial, and relational domains. The headteachers' questionnaire emphasised their own leadership activities and challenges, while the teachers' and SMC members' questionnaires explored perceptions of headteachers' leadership effectiveness, communication style, and community engagement.

The questionnaires primarily employed Likert-type scales to capture the degree of agreement or frequency of leadership practices. Prior to administration, the instruments were reviewed by two experts in educational management to ensure content validity and clarity of phrasing. A pilot study with five participants led to minor refinements in item wording and sequencing. Data collection was carried out over a three-month period using both postal and in-person methods. Approximately 60 per cent of responses were received by mail, while the remainder were collected through direct visits by the researcher to improve participation rates. The dual-mode approach allowed broader inclusion of participants from remote areas where postal communication is less reliable, thus increasing representativeness and response accuracy.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were organised, coded, and analysed using descriptive and simple inferential statistics, including frequencies, means, and percentage distributions. These techniques provided a clear picture of leadership practices and perceptions among different respondent groups (Yasmin et al., 2024). The analysis focused on the three main domains of leadership—instructional, managerial, and financial—while also identifying areas of convergence and divergence among the perspectives of headteachers, teachers, and SMC members. Interpretation of the quantitative data went beyond numerical description; findings were critically examined in relation to contextual realities, such as policy constraints, resource limitations, and sociocultural influences that shape leadership in non-government schools. This interpretive stance allowed the study to situate statistical trends within broader educational and institutional discourses, rather than treating them as isolated indicators.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to recognised ethical standards for educational and social research (BERA, 2018). Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, scope, and voluntary nature prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, who were assured of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by omitting identifying details such as school names, geographical locations, or personal identifiers in reporting. Data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Care was taken to ensure that participation did not interfere with professional duties or institutional relationships. The ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice guided the entire research process, aligning with the ethical protocols of the University of Queensland's Human Ethics Framework, where the researcher is affiliated.

3.6 Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Acknowledging that all research is shaped by the researcher's positionality, this study was conducted with explicit attention to reflexivity. The researcher's professional background in TESOL and educational leadership in Bangladesh provided both access and insight into the complexities of school governance. However, this insider status also posed potential biases in interpreting participants' responses. To mitigate these risks, reflexive journaling was employed throughout the research process to record assumptions, emerging interpretations, and decisions made during data collection and analysis (Alam et al., 2022a, 2022b; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). This practice promoted transparency and critical self-awareness. The researcher's dual identity—as both an insider familiar with local educational dynamics and an academic trained in global research paradigms—was used as a strength, allowing the analysis to bridge local understanding with international theoretical perspectives. Reflexivity thus functioned as a methodological tool for ensuring credibility and ethical integrity, recognising that the researcher's interpretive lens is part of the data rather than external to it.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis of data from 60 respondents across 20 non-government secondary schools reveals a complex portrait of school leadership in Bangladesh. While headteachers demonstrate commitment to institutional functioning, their leadership remains largely traditional, hierarchical, and compliance-oriented. The evidence points to a system where administrative order outweighs pedagogical innovation, reflecting the enduring influence of bureaucratic culture. The findings are organised into three interrelated domains: administrative and managerial leadership, instructional and academic leadership, and structural and cultural constraints.

4.1 Administrative and Managerial Leadership

The results indicate that most non-government secondary schools continue to operate under traditional managerial frameworks. About 73% of schools followed hierarchical decision-making styles, whereas only 25% reflected participatory or distributed leadership.

Although 75% prepared annual operational plans, none formulated long-term strategic goals—suggesting a short-term orientation that limits institutional vision. Interestingly, 92% of headteachers claimed to involve teachers or SMC members in planning, yet this participation was mostly symbolic. Discussions were often confined to formal consultation rather than shared decision-making, reinforcing a culture of top-down control.

The absence of written job descriptions for teachers and staff in all schools represents a major organisational gap. Without clear delineation of responsibilities, accountability and evaluation remain arbitrary. Likewise, implementation of the School Performance-Based Management System (SPBMS) was inconsistent: only 25% reported full application, while 75% implemented it partially due to workload pressures and large student numbers. These limitations reduce leadership to routine management rather than evidence-informed practice. Administrative capacity was further constrained by inadequate infrastructure—only half the schools had sufficient classrooms—and minimal attention to health and hygiene, with just 12% conducting regular check-ups. Moreover, 22% of respondents reported political interference in recruitment and SMC formation, exposing schools to external pressures that compromise autonomy. Overall, administrative leadership appeared reactive, focused on maintaining operations rather than driving improvement.

4.2 Instructional and Academic Leadership

In the instructional domain, headteachers acknowledged responsibility for academic supervision but demonstrated limited engagement in meaningful pedagogical leadership. Although 75% prepared academic plans, these largely took the form of calendars or exam schedules rather than frameworks for teaching quality or curriculum development. Only around 45% of teachers consistently prepared lesson plans, indicating weak instructional planning. Classroom supervision, while universal, often functioned as administrative inspection rather than mentoring. Teachers reported that observations focused on attendance registers and syllabus completion, with little emphasis on feedback or professional growth. Such practices reveal a culture of surveillance rather than support, where supervision reinforces compliance instead of fostering improvement.

Professional development activities were also sporadic. About half of the schools organised some in-house sessions, and 63% sent teachers to government institutions. However, these programs were irregular and largely procedural, aimed more at meeting policy requirements than enhancing pedagogical competence. The use of teaching aids remained basic—limited to chalk and board—with only 12% incorporating visual or interactive materials. Similarly, the implementation of School-Based Assessment (SBA) was partial, with 65% of schools adopting it fully and 30% partially. While this suggests progress, assessment practices often remained exam-oriented, lacking formative intent.

Co-curricular and inclusive initiatives were limited. Sports dominated extracurricular engagement (85%), while activities such as debates, clubs, or cultural programs were rare. Parent–Teacher Associations (PTAs) existed in 90% of schools, yet only 30% held regular meetings, reflecting weak community participation. Support for slower learners was

mostly informal; while 78% of schools used peer tutoring, only 28% provided structured remedial sessions. Collectively, these findings indicate that instructional leadership in non-government schools remains procedural and compliance-driven, with headteachers acting more as administrators than as catalysts for professional learning.

4.3 Structural and Cultural Constraints

The study also identified multiple structural and socio-political factors that restrict effective leadership. Excessive administrative workloads, inadequate facilities, and high student–teacher ratios emerged as persistent obstacles. Moreover, leadership autonomy is compromised by external interference: 75% of respondents cited undue SMC pressure, 40% reported direct political involvement, and 75% highlighted the limited leadership capacity of SMC members. These findings confirm that headteachers often function within a bounded sphere of authority, where political interests and bureaucratic oversight restrict strategic decision-making.

Low community engagement and variable teacher professionalism further compound these challenges. Around 80% of respondents observed limited parental awareness of school governance, and half pointed to teachers' lack of professional commitment. This constellation of factors results in what Bush and Ng (2019) describe as "bounded leadership"—a condition in which headteachers are responsible for improvement but lack the authority and resources to enact it. The combined effect of hierarchical culture, political interference, and weak professional development reduces leadership to a form of institutional maintenance rather than transformative action.

4.4 Summary of the Findings

In summary, the findings reveal that headteachers' leadership in non-government secondary schools is administratively active but pedagogically constrained. Their daily efforts are directed toward managing bureaucracy rather than leading learning. The predominance of hierarchical authority, coupled with limited autonomy and inadequate professional preparation, prevents schools from cultivating collaborative and innovative environments. Leadership in this context thus operates within structural and cultural boundaries that privilege compliance over creativity and maintenance over transformation. These patterns provide the foundation for the ensuing discussion, which interprets the findings through theoretical and contextual perspectives on educational leadership in the Global South.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a persistent paradox in educational leadership within Bangladesh's non-government secondary schools. While headteachers are positioned as central to improving educational quality, their ability to exercise meaningful leadership is limited by bureaucratic structures, political interference, and resource scarcity. This tension mirrors global patterns in developing contexts where school leaders are expected to drive reform but operate within restrictive institutional cultures (Bush, 2020; Hallinger, 2018; Harris, 2021). The dominance of traditional, hierarchical leadership continues to reflect the

colonial and bureaucratic legacies embedded in South Asian education systems (Sultana, 2020; Karim, 2021). Despite national policies promoting decentralisation and participatory management, leadership practices remain compliance-oriented, prioritising order, discipline, and administrative reporting over pedagogical transformation.

5.1 Administrative Leadership and Institutional Culture

The predominance of bureaucratic leadership supports Hallinger's (2018) observation that many Asian education systems favour administrative stability over instructional innovation. Authority tends to flow vertically, with accountability directed upwards rather than across the organisation. This culture of control reflects what Ball (2012) calls a *"performative culture,"* where fulfilling procedural requirements takes precedence over genuine improvement. The absence of long-term strategic planning and limited implementation of the School Performance-Based Management System (SPBMS) show how imported managerial reforms falter when enabling structures—such as time, resources, and professional autonomy—are missing (Pont et al., 2021).

At a deeper level, these patterns illustrate the continuation of colonial administrative logic in educational governance. Headteachers manage rather than lead, primarily ensuring compliance with policy mandates instead of driving innovation. The lack of formal job descriptions for teachers and staff reinforces role ambiguity, weakens accountability, and sustains ad hoc decision-making. Consequently, administrative leadership in these schools remains reactive and maintenance-driven, where success is measured by efficiency and control rather than creativity or collaboration.

5.2 Instructional Leadership and Pedagogical Constraints

Instructional leadership—widely recognised as a key determinant of learning quality (Milon et al., 2024; Robinson et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2020)—emerged as the weakest dimension of headteachers' practice. Although supervision and inspection were common, they were primarily bureaucratic exercises focused on registers and syllabus coverage rather than mentorship or pedagogical dialogue. Teachers' limited engagement in lesson planning and reflective teaching underscores a culture shaped by surveillance rather than professional trust. This finding supports Gronn's (2015) notion of *"leadership as practice within constraint,"* where headteachers perform leadership tasks dictated by institutional pressures rather than by pedagogical purpose.

Furthermore, the partial implementation of School-Based Assessment (SBA) and the minimal emphasis on co-curricular or inclusive programs suggest a narrow conception of educational quality. Headteachers' preoccupation with examinations and administrative routines leaves little room for nurturing creativity, critical thinking, or inclusive pedagogy. As Tikly (2020) notes, in many Global South contexts, quality reforms become reduced to measurable outputs, marginalising broader educational aims such as equity, participation, and well-being. Without stronger professional development systems and institutional support, headteachers are unlikely to move from managing teaching to leading learning.

5.3 Socio-Political Interference and Distributed Accountability

Another striking feature of the findings is the pervasive influence of political and community actors on school management. While community participation is vital for accountability, excessive interference often undermines professionalism and disrupts leadership integrity. Political involvement in recruitment, budgeting, and SMC formation exemplifies how decentralisation can devolve control without fostering empowerment. This corresponds with Bush and Ng's (2019) concept of *"bounded leadership,"* where school leaders operate within external limits that curtail genuine agency.

The weak managerial capacity of SMC members and limited parental awareness further fragment governance, resulting in what may be termed *distributed responsibility without distributed authority*. Headteachers thus navigate competing demands from bureaucratic superiors, political patrons, and community expectations, constantly negotiating their professional space. Their leadership becomes less about initiating change and more about balancing relationships and maintaining institutional harmony. In this context, leadership failure should be viewed not as an individual deficit but as a structural manifestation of a politicised and resource-poor educational environment.

5.4 Toward Transformative and Contextual Leadership

Addressing these challenges requires reframing leadership as a contextual and moral practice rather than a purely administrative role. The findings call for a shift from hierarchical managerialism to participatory and pedagogically focused leadership. As Tikly (2020) argues, educational leadership in the Global South should be guided by principles of social justice, equity, and sustainability instead of efficiency alone. For Bangladesh, this implies strengthening the systemic foundations of leadership through sustained professional development, decentralised decision-making, and transparent accountability mechanisms.

Equally important is the localisation of leadership models. Imported Western frameworks often fail because they neglect local values, cultural hierarchies, and socio-political realities (Harris, 2021). Effective leadership reform, therefore, must emerge from within Bangladesh's own educational culture, drawing on traditions of collaboration, service, and moral responsibility. By creating enabling conditions—adequate resources, institutional autonomy, and community trust—headteachers can move beyond compliance toward reflective and transformative practice.

In essence, headteachers' leadership should not be viewed as a personal attribute but as part of a wider leadership ecology encompassing teachers, communities, and policy structures. Sustainable improvement will depend not only on individual capability but also on the reconfiguration of the systems that shape how leadership is enacted. Without addressing these structural imbalances, school leadership in Bangladesh will remain trapped between aspiration and constraint—capable of maintaining stability but unable to deliver meaningful transformation.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study expose how the leadership of headteachers in Bangladesh's non-government secondary schools is structurally shaped by bureaucratic rationalities, political interference, and limited professional autonomy. Therefore, any recommendation for improvement must move beyond technical "capacity building" toward addressing the deeper epistemic and structural conditions that define leadership practice. Leadership reform in this context requires not merely better management but a fundamental rethinking of how authority, accountability, and professionalism are constructed and negotiated in educational institutions (Bush, 2020; Hallinger, 2018).

A key implication of this study is the need to reconceptualise leadership as a contextual and moral practice rather than as an imported managerial function. Western-centric models, often emphasising efficiency, performance indicators, and measurable outcomes, tend to reproduce dependency and overlook local sociocultural realities (Tikly, 2020; Harris, 2021). Instead, leadership frameworks in Bangladesh should draw on relational and ethical traditions that value service, collaboration, and collective responsibility. As Gronn (2015) and Fullan (2019) argue, effective leadership emerges through interdependence and shared moral purpose rather than through isolated administrative authority. Hence, leadership development must prioritise reflexivity, professional dialogue, and critical engagement rather than short-term training interventions.

Moreover, strengthening instructional and pedagogical leadership demands that headteachers should be positioned not as inspectors but as facilitators of professional learning. The current managerial culture, fixated on compliance, must be replaced by one that fosters inquiry and collaboration. As Robinson et al. (2008) demonstrate, leadership most effectively impacts student learning when it focuses on teacher development and pedagogical support. Therefore, rather than introducing more bureaucratic reforms such as School Performance-Based Management Systems (SPBMS) without sufficient support, the focus should be on cultivating what Fullan (2019) terms "professional capital"—a combination of human, social, and decisional capacity within schools.

Equally, participatory governance should not be romanticised as a cure-all for leadership weakness. While community involvement is crucial for accountability, the study reveals how politicised participation can erode professional authority. As Bush and Ng (2019) caution, decentralisation without capacity building merely redistributes dysfunction. Thus, SMCs and local actors must be equipped with critical governance literacy so that participation strengthens, rather than subverts, professional decision-making. This also calls for the creation of ethical boundaries that protect educational spaces from partisan capture—a point long emphasised in debates on postcolonial educational governance (Sultana, 2020; Karim, 2021).

Finally, leadership reform must be situated within a broader project of educational justice and sustainability. As Tikly (2020) argues, leadership in the Global South must serve not only institutional improvement but also social transformation—addressing inequalities in access, voice, and participation. Headteachers must therefore be empowered to see themselves as

agents of cultural and linguistic sustainability, bridging global education discourses with local aspirations. For Bangladesh, this means embedding leadership within policies that promote equity, multilingual inclusion, and critical pedagogy.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the leadership practices of headteachers in non-government secondary schools in Bangladesh, revealing that their leadership remains heavily shaped by bureaucratic, cultural, and political constraints. Although headteachers occupy a central role in ensuring institutional performance, their agency is confined within systems that privilege compliance over creativity and control over collaboration. The persistence of traditional, hierarchical leadership styles reflects enduring colonial legacies in educational governance and highlights the gap between policy discourse and practice. While government initiatives promote decentralisation and performance-based management, these reforms often fail to translate into meaningful change due to limited autonomy, inadequate professional development, and structural inequities.

Critically, the study underscores that leadership in this context is less a matter of personal competence than of structural configuration. Headteachers operate as *bounded leaders*—professionals negotiating tensions between bureaucratic authority, community expectations, and pedagogical aspirations. To move beyond this impasse, educational leadership in Bangladesh must be reconceptualised as a moral, contextual, and relational practice rooted in professional trust, shared accountability, and local values. This requires systemic reform that integrates leadership preparation, resource allocation, and participatory governance into a coherent national strategy.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The use of a quantitative, descriptive design limited the depth of interpretive insight into participants' lived experiences. Future research could adopt mixed-methods or ethnographic approaches to explore how headteachers navigate power, culture, and policy discourses in their everyday practice. Longitudinal studies could also examine how leadership practices evolve in response to recent policy changes, particularly around decentralisation and school-based management. Furthermore, comparative studies across government and non-government schools—or across South Asian contexts—would illuminate how different institutional ecologies shape leadership behaviour and reform outcomes.

In essence, leadership in Bangladesh's non-government secondary schools should not be seen merely as administrative management but as a site of negotiation and transformation. Strengthening this leadership requires rethinking the structures that constrain it, building professional communities grounded in reflexivity and equity, and cultivating leaders who can navigate the intersections of policy, culture, and pedagogy. Only then can leadership become not an act of compliance, but an instrument of sustainable educational change in the Global South.

References

Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2018). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Al Nahar, A., Hira, F. K., & Milon, M. R. K. (2024). From policy to practice: Evaluating the implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) in Bangladeshi primary schools. *ICRRD Journal, 5*(3), 125–138.

Alam, M. R., Ansarey, D., Halim, H. A., Rana, M. M., Milon, M. R. K., & Mitu, R. K. (2022a). Exploring Bangladeshi university students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English classes through a qualitative study. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education, 7*(2), 1–17.

Alam, M. R., Islam, M. S., Ansarey, D., Rana, M. M., Milon, M. R. K., Halim, H. A., Jahan, S., & Rashid, A. (2024). Unveiling the professional identity construction of in-service university English language teachers: Evidence from Bangladesh. *Ampersand, 12,* 100178. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amper.2024.100178

Alam, M. R., Jahan, S., Milon, M. R. K., Ansarey, D., & Faruque, A. S. U. (2021). Accelerating learners' self-confidence level in second language acquisition: A qualitative study. *ICRRD Quality Index Research Journal, 2*(3), 141–153.

Alam, M. R., Milon, M. R. K., & Sharmin, M. (2018). Hindrances to use and prepare the lesson plan of secondary school teachers in Bangladesh and some recommendations. *Australasian Journal of Business, Social Science and Information Technology, 4*(4), 189–197.

Alam, M. R., Milon, M. R. K., & Rahman, M. K., & Hassan, A. (2022b). Technology application in tourism event, education and training for making a nation's image. In A. Hassan (Ed.), *Technology application in tourism fairs, festivals and events in Asia* (pp. 149–163). Singapore: Springer.

Alam, M. R., Sulaiman, M., Bhuiyan, M. M. R., Islam, M. S., Imam, M. H., Hossen, M. S., & Milon, M. R. K. (2025). Online corrective feedback and self-regulated writing: Exploring student perceptions and challenges in higher education. *World Journal of English Language, 15*(6), 139–150.

Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global education inc.: New policy networks and the neo-liberal imaginary.* Routledge.

BANBEIS. (2022). *Bangladesh education statistics 2022.* Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics. https://banbeis.portal.gov.bd

British Educational Research Association. (2018). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (4th ed.). BERA. https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018

Bush, T. (2020). *Theories of educational leadership and management* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Bush, T., & Ng, A. Y. M. (2019). School leadership and educational quality in the Global South. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 47*(3), 361–375.

Chowdhury, M. A., & Kabir, M. R. (2022). Transformational leadership of headteachers in implementing school-level improvement planning (SLIP) in Bangladesh. *Teacher's World: Journal of Education and Research, 49*(1), 175–189.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Day, C., & Sammons, P. (2016). *Successful school leadership.* Education Development Trust.

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics, 5*(1), 1–4.

Fullan, M. (2019). *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Gronn, P. (2015). *Relational leadership: Theory, practice and development.* Routledge.

Hallinger, P. (2018). Instructional leadership and school improvement: Reflections on ten years of research. *School Leadership & Management, 38*(4), 351–354.

Hallinger, P., & Murphy, J. (1985). Assessing the instructional management behavior of principals. *The Elementary School Journal, 86*(2), 217–247.

Haque, A., Islam, N., Samrat, N. H., Dey, S., & Ray, B. (2021). Smart farming through responsible leadership in Bangladesh: Possibilities, opportunities, and beyond. *Sustainability*, *13*(8), 4511.

Harris, A. (2021). COVID-19 – School leadership in disruptive times. *School Leadership & Management, 40*(4), 243–247.

Kabir, F., Green, R., & Chowdhury, K. (2020). Primary Education In Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis of The Role Of Head Teacher Securing Quality Primary School. *IJARIIE, 6*(2), 36-50.

Karim, M. R. (2021). Governance challenges in MPO-funded schools in Bangladesh. *Bangladesh Journal of Public Administration, 29*(1), 67–80.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, *28*(1), 27-42.

Male, T., & Palaiologou, I. (2019). Leadership in early childhood education: The case for pedagogical praxis. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 20*(1), 23–34.

Milon, M. R. K. (2016). Challenges of teaching English at the rural primary schools in Bangladesh: Some recommendations. *ELK Asia Pacific Journal of Social Science, 2*(3), 1–17.

Milon, M. R. K. (2020). A close investigation of the interaction between the individual and the society in *The American Scholar*. *Port City International University Journal, 7*(1–2), 71–79.

Milon, M. R. K., & Ali, T. M. (2023). From language movement to language policy: A critical examination of English in Bangladeshi tertiary education. *ICRRD Journal, 4*(4), 101–115.

Milon, M. R. K., Alam, M. R., & Hossain, M. R. (2018a). A comparative study on the methods and practices of English language teaching in Bangla and English medium schools in Bangladesh. *Australasian Journal of Business, Social Science and Information Technology, 4*(3), 118–126.

Milon, M. R. K., Hossain, M. R., & Alam, M. R. (2018b). Factors influencing dropouts at undergraduate level in private universities of Bangladesh: A case study. *Australasian Journal of Business, Social Science and Information Technology, 4*(4), 177–188.

Milon, M. R. K., Hossain, M. R., & Begum, R. (2017). Women's revolution against the male-dominated society in R. K. Narayan's novels. *ELK Asia Pacific Journal of Social Science, 3*(2), 1–14.

Milon, M. R. K., Imam, M. H., & Muhury, P. (2024). Transforming the landscape of higher education in Bangladesh: Teachers' perspectives on implementing outcome-based education (OBE). *ICRRD Journal, 5*(2), 117–135.

Milon, M. R. K., Ishtiaq, M., Ali, T. M., & Imam, M. S. (2023). Unlocking fluency: Task-based language teaching (TBLT) in tertiary speaking classes—Insights from Bangladeshi teachers and students. *ICRRD Journal, 4*(4), 218–230.

Palaiologou, I., & Male, T. (2019). Leadership in early childhood education: The case for pedagogical praxis. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 20*(1), 23–34.

Pont, B., Nusche, D., & Moorman, H. (2021). *Improving school leadership: Policy and practice.* OECD Publishing.

Rahman, A., & Akter, S. (2022). Students' perceptions of head teacher leadership roles for student engagement at secondary schools in Bangladesh. *Teacher's World: Journal of Education and Research, 49*(1), 137–154.

Rahman, M. R. (2019). The effect of teachers' training on secondary English teachers' practice of CLT in Bangladesh. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, 8*(3), 123–133.

Robinson, V. M. J., 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.

Spillane, J. P. (2006). Distributed leadership. *The Educational Forum, 69*(Winter), 143–150.

Sultana, M. (2020). Non-formal education for sustainable development in Bangladesh: A study. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies, 8*(2), 22–35.

Tikly, L. (2020). Educational leadership and the Global South: Reframing the debate. *Journal of Educational Administration and History, 52*(4), 321–322.

UNESCO. (2018). *Activating policy levers for Education 2030: The untapped potential of governance, school leadership, and monitoring and evaluation policies.* UNESCO Publishing. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265951

UNESCO. (2018). *Strengthening head teacher leadership for quality education in South Asia.* UNESCO New Delhi. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000266175

Yasmin, A., Milon, M. R. K., & Imam, M. H. (2024). An examination of practices and perspectives of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in tertiary literary classes: Insights from Bangladesh. *ICRRD Journal, 5*(2), 101–116.