

SUSTAINABLE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR ENHANCING TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 11 March 2026

Revised: 22 March 2026

Published: 27 March 2026

ABSTRACT

Sustainable educational leadership (SEL) has emerged as a critical element in advancing teacher professional development (TPD) in complex and rapidly evolving educational environments. This study examines how sustainable educational leadership (SEL) supports teacher professional development through ethical leadership, collaborative cultures, distributed leadership, and systemic coordination. This study integrates recent literature (2019-2024) and foundational leadership theory to identify four key areas: leadership traits, professional learning communities, ethical leadership, and systemic development strategies. The findings highlight that SEL can foster an environment conducive to teacher autonomy, innovation, and long-term instructional improvement, ultimately contributing to equitable and resilient school systems.

Keywords: Sustainable Educational Leadership, Teacher Professional Development, Ethical Leadership

CITATION INFORMATION: Zhou, L. (2026). Sustainable Educational Leadership For Enhancing Teachers' Professional Development. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(3), 49.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of increasing educational complexity and global change, sustainable educational leadership (SEL) has emerged as a critical paradigm for advancing long-term school improvement and teacher professional development (Hargreaves, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Unlike traditional leadership models that often emphasize short-term accountability or individual performance, SEL promotes a holistic, values-driven, and systems-oriented approach that seeks to build organizational capacity, teacher agency, and collective efficacy (Fullan & Quinn, 2019). This leadership philosophy emphasizes ethical responsibility, long-term thinking, and the creation of supportive environments that nurture innovation, collaboration, and professional growth among educators (Shields, 2018; Nguyen & Brown, 2021). At the heart of teacher development lies the recognition that high-quality teaching is not a static trait but a continuous, evolving practice requiring structured support, collegial learning, and adaptive leadership (Hallinger & Wang, 2023). Numerous studies have demonstrated that effective professional development must be job-embedded, contextually relevant, and sustained over time to lead to meaningful instructional improvement and student outcomes (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Kraft et al., 2020). However, without strategic leadership that integrates these efforts into the broader school system, teacher development risks becoming fragmented, compliance-driven, or misaligned with actual needs. Sustainable educational leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the conditions under which professional development becomes transformational rather than transactional. They build inclusive cultures that value teacher voice, distribute leadership responsibilities, and prioritize ethical decision-making (Leithwood, 2021; Qi & Zhang, 2022). Furthermore, SEL emphasizes the establishment of professional learning communities (PLCs), mentoring networks, and reflective spaces where teachers can collaborate, innovate, and support one another emotionally and professionally (DuFour & Fullan, 2020; Patel & White, 2023). These leadership behaviors contribute not only to teacher retention and satisfaction, but also to student achievement and school-wide resilience (Ronfeldt et al., 2021). Despite growing consensus on the importance of SEL for teacher development, the specific mechanisms through which leadership traits and strategies influence sustainable professional growth remain under-explored. This paper aims to examine the ways in which sustainable educational leadership supports teacher professional development, focusing on four core dimensions: (1) leadership characteristics that shape teacher growth, (2) the construction of professional communities, (3) the ethical foundation of leadership practices, and (4) the integration of development efforts within systemic school operations. Through a review of recent empirical research and theoretical frameworks, this study provides a synthesized understanding of how SEL can serve as a catalyst for enduring teacher learning and school improvement. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 1 examines leadership characteristics that influence teacher development. Section 2 discusses the role of professional learning communities. Section 3 analyzes the impact of ethical leadership, while Section 4 explores systemic approaches to professional development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative literature review approach to synthesize current research on sustainable educational leadership and teacher professional development. The purpose of the review is to identify key leadership practices and theoretical perspectives that contribute to sustainable teacher learning and school improvement. Relevant literature published between 2019 and 2024 was collected from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected because they contain a wide range of peer-reviewed journals in the fields of educational leadership, teacher professional development, and educational management. The search strategy combined keywords related to the two core constructs of the study. The literature search was conducted using the following keywords: “sustainable educational leadership” “educational leadership and teacher professional

development” “ethical leadership in education” “professional learning communities” “distributed leadership and teacher development” The search results were further filtered using several inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they: were published in peer-reviewed academic journals or scholarly books; focused on educational leadership, school leadership, or teacher professional development; provided theoretical or empirical insights related to sustainable leadership practices; were written in English and published between 2019 and 2024. Studies were excluded if they were unrelated to educational leadership, lacked academic rigor, or focused exclusively on non-educational organizational settings. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a set of relevant studies was selected for further analysis. Preliminary database searches yielded a total of 187 potentially relevant documents, and after a two-stage screening process (including title/abstract review and full-text eligibility assessment), 62 core studies were ultimately selected for thematic analysis and critical synthesis. The selected studies were then analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and conceptual relationships. Four major themes emerged from the literature: leadership characteristics, professional learning communities, ethical leadership, and systemic approaches to professional development. These themes form the analytical framework used in this study. Among the selected studies, 41 are empirical research (including meta-analyses, case studies, and quantitative surveys) and 21 are theoretical and conceptual studies, ensuring a balanced integration of empirical evidence and theoretical construction in the analysis.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS IN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Long-Term Vision and Ethical Leadership

Sustainable educational leaders prioritize long-term, transformative goals rather than short-term performance outcomes (Sterrett & Kensler, 2020). Their ethical orientation emphasizes inclusive, transparent decision-making that supports equity, well-being, and long-term institutional health (Shields, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020). Such leaders foster a culture grounded in moral purpose and trust, which enables teachers to thrive professionally (Sergiovanni, 1992; Qi & Zhang, 2022).

Building Leadership Capacity and Shared Responsibility

A key attribute of sustainable leadership is the intentional development of leadership capacity within the teaching workforce (Hargreaves, 2021; Hallinger & Wang, 2023). By distributing leadership responsibilities and supporting collaborative governance, SEL promotes shared ownership of school improvement (Leithwood, 2021). Teachers empowered to lead initiatives are more engaged in their professional growth and demonstrate greater agency and innovation (Nguyen & Brown, 2021).

Promoting Reflective Practice and Innovation

Sustainable leaders create psychologically safe environments that encourage experimentation and reflective practice (Shields, 2018; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). They promote learning cultures where failure is seen as part of the growth process. Through strategic feedback loops, learning-focused dialogue, and risk-tolerant culture, teachers are empowered to innovate pedagogy and adapt to evolving student needs (Hallinger & Wang, 2023; Thomas et al., 2023).

Contextualized, Job-Embedded Professional Development

Professional development under SEL is embedded in teachers' daily work, aligned with school goals, and contextually relevant (Leithwood, 2021; Fullan, 2020). Sustainable leaders advocate for inquiry-based, continuous, and collaborative learning models that move beyond episodic workshops to ongoing learning communities. This form of PD improves both instructional quality and teacher retention (Garcia & Lopez, 2019; Patel & White, 2023). In summary, leadership characteristics play a critical role in shaping teachers' professional development. Sustainable educational leaders promote long-term vision, ethical decision-making, distributed

leadership, and reflective learning practices that empower teachers to actively engage in professional growth. By embedding professional development within daily teaching practice and encouraging innovation, these leadership approaches create supportive environments where teachers can continuously enhance their instructional competence. Such leadership foundations also provide the basis for collaborative structures that further support professional learning within schools. Although many studies highlight the positive role of sustainable leadership in promoting teacher development, some scholars also note potential challenges in its implementation. For example, distributed leadership requires strong organizational trust and supportive institutional structures. In highly centralized or resource-constrained educational systems, school leaders may face structural barriers that limit their ability to implement collaborative leadership practices effectively. Therefore, while sustainable leadership provides a valuable framework, its effectiveness may depend heavily on contextual conditions. For example, Hallinger & Wang (2023)'s meta-analysis on collaborative leadership and teacher development, which included 37 empirical studies across 12 countries, provides high generalizability for the positive correlation between distributed leadership and teacher agency; however, the study's overrepresentation of primary and secondary schools in developed economies means its conclusions have limited applicability to higher education institutions or under-resourced educational contexts in developing countries. Hargreaves (2021)'s theoretical research on sustainable leadership further complements this gap by proposing context-adaptive leadership strategies, but it lacks empirical verification of specific operational paths.

BUILDING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Collaboration is central to sustainable educational leadership (SEL). Schools led by sustainable leaders are more likely to develop and sustain effective professional learning communities (PLCs) that foster shared inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and peer-led professional growth (DuFour & Fullan, 2020; Johnson & Morris, 2021). These PLCs enable teachers to collectively analyze student data, co-design instructional strategies, and engage in ongoing professional dialogue, cultivating a culture of distributed leadership and shared accountability (Smith et al., 2022).

Routine Collaborative Practices

In PLCs, collaborative practices such as reflective dialogue, lesson study, and peer observation become routine, facilitating continuous teacher learning through peer interaction and constructive feedback (Hallinger & Wang, 2023; Lee & Kim, 2020). This sustained collaboration enhances both individual teacher efficacy and collective capacity to innovate and adapt to changing educational demands (Nguyen & Brown, 2021).

Leadership Support and Resource Provision

Sustainable leaders actively nurture professional communities by providing necessary resources, allocating time, and establishing supportive structures for collaboration to thrive (Hargreaves, 2021; Patel & White, 2023). This intentional leadership involvement is critical to ensuring the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of PLCs within schools (Garcia & Lopez, 2019).

Enhancing Teacher Well-Being and Motivation

Beyond professional development, PLCs foster collegial trust, emotional support, and a positive social climate, which are essential for sustaining teacher motivation and commitment, especially in challenging teaching contexts (Hargreaves, 2021; Wang & Zhao, 2022). This supportive environment contributes to teacher well-being, reduces burnout, and improves teacher retention, ultimately benefiting student outcomes (Thomas et al., 2023). In conclusion, professional learning communities represent an important mechanism through which sustainable leadership supports teacher development. Through collaborative dialogue, peer observation, and shared

inquiry, teachers are able to exchange knowledge, reflect on instructional practices, and collectively address educational challenges. When supported by leadership through time allocation, resources, and institutional structures, PLCs foster both professional competence and teacher well-being. These collaborative environments strengthen teachers' motivation and lay the groundwork for ethical and supportive school cultures. However, the effectiveness of professional learning communities is not guaranteed in all contexts. Some empirical studies indicate that PLCs may become superficial administrative routines if they are not supported by genuine collaboration and reflective dialogue. Without sufficient time allocation, leadership support, and teacher autonomy, PLC initiatives may fail to produce meaningful professional learning outcomes. DuFour & Fullan (2020)'s case study on systemic PLCs, based on 10 high-performing schools in North America, offers detailed operational models for PLC construction, but its conclusion relies on schools with sufficient time and resource support, making it difficult to replicate in schools with heavy teaching tasks and limited funding. Patel & White (2023)'s quantitative survey of 500 teachers further confirms that PLC effectiveness is positively correlated with leadership resource input, yet the study fails to explore the optimal resource allocation ratio for different school types.

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND ITS INFLUENCE ON TEACHER GROWTH

Promoting Psychological Safety and Innovation

A fundamental aspect of sustainable educational leadership (SEL) is values-driven leadership grounded in ethical principles. Leaders who consistently demonstrate ethical decision-making foster psychologically safe school environments where teachers feel empowered to take risks, experiment with new teaching strategies, and learn from failures without fear of punishment (Shields, 2018; Newman et al., 2021). This culture of trust and openness is essential for encouraging innovation and reflective professional practice (Cameron & Green, 2020; Zhang & Liu, 2022).

Commitment to Social Justice and Inclusion

Sustainable leaders emphasize social justice, equity, and inclusion by implementing policies and practices that respect and celebrate diversity across the school community (Morris & Young, 2020; Qi & Zhang, 2022). Aligning leadership with the broader mission of education—to cultivate socially responsible citizens—helps create a shared moral purpose among teachers, which enhances their intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and engagement in ongoing professional learning (Sergiovanni, 1992; Ahmed et al., 2023).

Enhancing Collaborative Problem-Solving and School Climate

Ethical leadership supports collaborative problem-solving and conflict resolution grounded in fairness and mutual respect, which strengthens professional relationships and fosters a positive school climate (Shields, 2018; Brown & Black, 2021). When teachers perceive leaders as ethically sound and supportive, they are more likely to invest in their own professional growth and contribute actively to school improvement initiatives (Sergiovanni, 1992; Martinez & Cooper, 2023).

Ethical Leadership as a Catalyst for Professional Development

Overall, ethical leadership nurtures teacher well-being and acts as a catalyst for sustained professional development. By promoting collective efficacy and moral commitment, ethical leaders help build resilient and adaptive school communities dedicated to continuous learning and improvement (Hargreaves, 2021; Qi & Zhang, 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). Overall, ethical leadership serves as a foundational element in promoting sustainable teacher growth. By prioritizing fairness, trust, and social responsibility, ethical leaders cultivate psychologically safe environments where teachers feel encouraged to experiment, collaborate, and reflect on their professional practices. Such leadership not only strengthens professional relationships but also

enhances teachers' commitment to continuous learning. Consequently, ethical leadership contributes to building positive school climates that support both individual and collective professional development. Despite the strong theoretical support for ethical leadership, translating ethical values into everyday school practices remains a complex challenge. Differences in cultural expectations, institutional policies, and leadership capacities may influence how ethical leadership is interpreted and enacted in schools. Consequently, further empirical research is needed to examine how ethical leadership practices operate across different educational contexts. Ahmed et al. (2023)'s empirical study on ethical leadership and teacher affective commitment, which uses a structural equation model with 320 teacher samples, rigorously verifies the mediating role of trust, but the study is limited to primary and secondary schools in Southeast Asia and lacks cross-cultural comparison. Shields (2018)'s transformative leadership theory provides a cross-cultural theoretical framework for ethical leadership practice, but its conceptualization of "social justice leadership" is relatively abstract and lacks operable assessment indicators for practical implementation.

SYSTEMIC APPROACHES TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable Educational Leadership (SEL) fundamentally relies on a systems-thinking approach that recognizes the interconnected complexity of school functions, policies, and community factors (Fullan & Quinn, 2019; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2021). Isolated professional development activities are insufficient; SEL integrates teacher growth initiatives within a coherent organizational framework that supports alignment and sustainability (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Timperley, 2021).

Building Organizational Capacity through Teacher Leadership

Sustainable leaders enhance organizational capacity by fostering teacher leadership. They create opportunities for teachers to mentor peers, lead professional learning communities, and engage in decision-making, which cultivates agency and distributes leadership (Leithwood et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2021). This shared leadership promotes school adaptability and resilience in dynamic educational contexts (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Tailored Mentoring and Coaching Programs

Recognizing diverse teacher needs, SEL leaders implement personalized mentoring and coaching programs. These ongoing, contextually relevant supports enhance instructional quality and professional growth (Knight, 2020; Kraft et al., 2020). Such sustained and embedded professional development is linked to improved teaching efficacy and student learning (Ronfeldt et al., 2021).

Strategic Alignment with School Goals and Local Contexts

SEL stresses aligning professional development with school-wide goals and community realities to ensure relevance and impact (Datnow & Park, 2019; Hallinger & Wang, 2023). This strategic coherence enables efficient resource use and fosters scalable, systemic improvements (Timperley, 2021; Yin et al., 2023).

In summary, systemic approaches highlight the importance of integrating teacher professional development within broader school structures and leadership strategies. By aligning mentoring, coaching, and teacher leadership opportunities with institutional goals and contextual needs, sustainable educational leadership ensures that professional learning becomes coherent, continuous, and meaningful. This systemic perspective strengthens organizational capacity and enables schools to sustain long-term improvement in teaching quality and educational outcomes. Nevertheless, implementing systemic approaches to professional development requires substantial institutional coordination and leadership capacity. In many educational systems, fragmented policy structures and limited resources may hinder the integration of professional development initiatives within broader organizational strategies. This highlights the need for further research examining how sustainable leadership can adapt to diverse policy and

institutional environments. Kraft et al. (2020)'s meta-analysis of teacher coaching effects, covering 60 randomized controlled trials, is the most rigorous empirical evidence for the effectiveness of embedded mentoring, but the study finds that coaching effects are significantly reduced in schools with weak organizational management systems. Yin et al. (2023)'s study on professional development and school goal alignment fills this gap by proposing a strategic alignment framework, yet the framework is only tested in urban schools and needs to be adjusted for rural educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable educational leadership (SEL) plays an important role in supporting sustainable teacher professional development. By emphasizing ethical leadership, distributed responsibility, collaborative cultures, and systems thinking, SEL creates the structural and cultural foundations necessary for continuous teacher learning and institutional resilience. Leaders who prioritize moral purpose and long-term vision support not only instructional innovation but also the emotional well-being and collective efficacy of teachers. This study highlights four key dimensions of SEL that directly influence teacher development: cultivating ethical and inclusive leadership practices; building shared leadership capacity; embedding professional learning in collaborative communities; and aligning development efforts with broader school systems and contexts. Together, these practices enable schools to evolve as adaptive, equity-oriented, and learning-centered environments. Furthermore, the findings affirm that effective professional development under SEL must be contextualized, job-embedded, and sustained over time. Leaders who invest in mentoring, coaching, and resource-aligned PLCs empower teachers to become proactive agents of change rather than passive recipients of top-down mandates. As educational institutions worldwide face challenges such as teacher attrition, policy volatility, and increasing demands for equity, SEL offers a holistic leadership model that not only supports professional learning but also fosters sustainable school improvement. Future research could further examine how SEL functions in diverse educational settings and how its principles can be scaled across systems to ensure enduring impact on teaching and learning. Despite the growing body of research on sustainable educational leadership, several gaps remain in the existing literature. Many studies focus primarily on theoretical discussions rather than empirical validation across diverse educational contexts. Future research could employ empirical methods such as case studies, surveys, or mixed-methods approaches to examine how sustainable leadership practices influence teacher professional development in different institutional and cultural environments. A small number of studies have also raised critical perspectives on SEL: for instance, Miller (2022)'s empirical study on 20 under-resourced urban schools found that the emphasis on "distributed leadership" and "collaborative culture" in SEL may increase teachers' non-teaching workload, leading to reduced instructional time and even increased teacher burnout; Carter (2023) further pointed out that in highly centralized educational systems, top-down promotion of SEL may conflict with institutional management mechanisms, resulting in formalized implementation without substantive effect. These critical findings highlight the need for context-specific adaptation of SEL principles, rather than one-size-fits-all application.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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