

Leadership and its impact on educational institutions: a systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Leadership, in the educational field, is an important tool to improve the functioning of an educational institution and student learning. For this, trained leaders are required to exercise the most appropriate changes and manage the joint work of workers, in order to meet the proposed goals. In this context, this work had the objective of this article was to explore the role of directors and teachers in achieving the objectives of educational institutions, identify the most recommended leadership style for educational institutions, and identify the importance of having strong leadership within them. With this aim in mind, a systematic review of the literature based on the PRISMA method was carried out, selecting 50 publications. As a result, it was concluded that good leadership is fundamental for the academic development of institutions at any educational level, and that much of this responsibility falls on managers. In addition, the transformational leadership style is highlighted as the most effective to be used within schools and universities, and to provide a better educational experience for students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been a topic of interest since ancient times, which has acquired greater relevance nowadays, and has come to be considered as a social, global and strategic process. This is due to the fundamental role it plays within organizations, since it is capable of considerably influencing their success or failure depending on the qualities of the people in charge [1], [2]. Throughout history there have been leaders capable of mobilizing large groups of people to achieve a common goal through their leadership, in diverse areas such as business, military, art, religion, among others. Among the most notable are figures such as Martin Luther King [3], whose role in history and his leadership capacity is a subject of interest for schools in the formation of their students [4]. In fact, the thought of Martin Luther King, in educational environments, allows the formation of communities and cultural identities [5]; thus, the influence that a competent leader can exert on people is evident [6].

Leadership employs factors such as commitment to the company or job satisfaction, responding to its need to find alternatives that generate better results in the modern environment [7]. In other words, it is necessary to have a leader with sufficient capacity to guide the available human capital, so that they take advantage of the material and financial resources of the organization towards the achievement of its objectives and ensure their own subsistence [8]. This is particularly relevant in the educational field, since this type of

institutions are fundamental for the academic development of children and young people, so leaders are required to execute a solid directive and teaching management to achieve the objectives oriented to student learning [9]. Specifically, a study conducted in Palestine has demonstrated the effectiveness of various leadership strategies (regulatory control, strategic guidance, and talent investment) in improving educational quality in Palestinian universities [10].

Leadership focused on education is known as pedagogical or learning-centered, which is defined as the ability to influence others and mobilize the organization to improve student learning [11]. Through it, it seeks to improve the functioning of an educational institution while improving student learning [12]. Currently, these institutions require a series of changes in order to adapt to the new social conditions and achieve better teacher and student performance [13]. For this, it is necessary to work together with the different people involved with the educational institution, from coordinators and teachers to parents and students. Among these people, the role of the principal stands out as the main motivator to ensure the achievement of the proposed goals [14]. A study conducted in the United States demonstrated the effectiveness of educational leadership in implementing changes in areas of student discipline through strategies implemented by an institution, which involved parents, teachers and principals [15].

While teachers are directly responsible for overseeing the teaching and learning process within an educational institution, directive management encompasses many more tasks that involve aspects of communication, planning, projection, control, among others [9]. Executive management is the instance of administrative and financial management of the educational institution, so they are primarily responsible for ensuring student learning and ensuring educational quality [16], something that can be reflected in the satisfaction of teachers and student [14]. In this way, it is possible to strengthen aspects such as the professional growth of teachers, the strategic use of resources, or the effectiveness of curricula or current teaching methods [12]. A study conducted in Peru showed that management leadership has a close relationship with teacher satisfaction and educational quality [17], which reinforces the statements made above.

All of the evidence the role of leadership within the educational sector [13]. In this context, research questions were posed: i) What role does the leadership of directors and teachers play in meeting the objectives of educational institutions?; ii) What is the most recommended leadership style for educational institutions?; and iii) What is the importance of having good leadership in educational institutions? Therefore, the objective of this article was to explore the role of directors and teachers in achieving the objectives of educational institutions, identify the most recommended leadership style for educational institutions, and identify the importance of having strong leadership within them. For this purpose, a systematic review of the literature was carried out in the Scopus database (through ScienceDirect) and Scielo, which allowed the study to be contextualized at a Latin American and global level.

A leader is characterized by a superior mental ability, emotional maturity and stability that allows them to solve problems in order to achieve the proposed objectives, in addition to developing charisma and empathy with both their bosses and subordinates. In addition, other qualities that define a leader are highlighted, such as creativity, authenticity, honesty and integrity [18]. From this, it is possible to affirm that a leader is not only the person who guides the organization, but one with the ability to influence people to jointly achieve the objectives of the organization [19]. These are people with the ability to instill enthusiasm and confidence in their collaborators, while at the same time being clear about the organization's objectives and not afraid to take risks, qualities that differentiate them from the role assumed by a boss, who merely commands and orders his workers [19], [20].

There is a debate as to whether a leader is born or made. In the 19th century, the Great Man Theory emerged, which advocated the nativism of leaders, so, under this theory, few people possess the essential characteristics to perform effective leadership [21]. Then, in the 1940s, Behavioral Theory emerged, which advocated training leaders through teaching behaviors, but ignored the context surrounding them [22]. For its part, at the beginning of the 21st century, transactional theories of leadership emerged, which no longer focused on innateness or training, but rather focused on the interaction of leaders with followers, followers, and the system [23]. In this way, it is stated that leadership theory is a dynamic phenomenon and continues to change over time.

Also, it can be affirmed that some people have innate leadership abilities, while others are able to acquire them through their professional growth. Although these naturally acquired capabilities favor the development of a leader, training and acquired experience are more decisive [24]. In general terms, people form their skills, character and personality as a result of the various challenges that arise and that constantly push them to make decisions, which allows them to acquire some leadership profiles that can be reinforced later [25]. The importance of developing the self-esteem of leaders is highlighted, since this facilitates their acceptance as such by other workers by observing that this person has great self-confidence [24].

Each leader, in general, has a unique behavior that characterizes them, which is defined as their leadership style. Since there is a great variety of these styles, it is important to select the most appropriate one according to the type of organization one is working with. Each type of leadership has its own characteristics

and can be applied in different scenarios, which is why there is no single leadership style that is the best for all cases [1]. The following are some of the most common types of leadership in recent years, accompanied by a brief description [1], [8]: i) Authoritarian leadership; ii) Democratic leadership; iii) Laissez-Faire leadership; iv) Transactional leadership; and v) Transformational leadership.

An authoritarian leader focuses on the achievement of objectives and shows little interest in people. It is characterized by giving orders and determining the activities to be done, as well as those in charge of executing or supervising them, without a direct participation in said activities [26]. Two types of leadership stand out. Coercive leadership is characterized by using threats and punishments [27], in the educational field, any incentive for teachers and students is eliminated, which ends up demotivating them in the long term. Benevolent leadership is characterized by its imposingness and condescension [27], in the educational field, the relationship between the actors is maintained only on the basis of rewards and a real relationship is not formed. The disadvantages of this type of leadership are demotivation of those involved in the teaching-learning process, reduced commitment, impact on the institutional climate and a considerable increase in stress.

A democratic leader, also known as participative, is characterized by motivating his workers and encouraging both horizontal and vertical communication. One of their main characteristics is their interest in decentralizing decisions in order to encourage greater participation by their subordinates [28]. In educational institutions, he can obtain the support of his students, while constantly seeking to achieve trust, respect and commitment in the group of teachers and students [29]. However, it causes decision-making processes to become slow and can alter the perception of the leader (principal or teacher), since it presents him or her as one lacking experience.

A Laissez-Faire leader (French expression meaning “let be”) gives workers a certain degree of freedom to carry out their activities as they see fit. In addition, it is characterized by avoiding making decisions and intervene only when there are problems that they are unable to solve [1]. In the field of educational institutions, management provides facilities and autonomy to teachers during the teaching-learning process, which allows education to be personalized or adapted to particular situations [30]. The main disadvantage of this type of leadership is the constant absence of the principal, which can cause the responsibilities of teachers or students to not be clearly defined.

A transactional leader focuses on benefiting both the company and employees by providing incentives and motivating workers to do a good job [1]. In educational institutions, what is sought with rewards is to maintain the flow of academic activities constantly through rewards [31]. However, problems can arise when trying to maintain efficiency once these rewards are no longer given or are no longer liked by teachers. Another problem that arises with this type of leadership is stagnation since it does not allow the development of a new strategic vision.

The style considered the most convenient for companies to achieve innovation and change. The transformational leader is characterized by promoting proactive behaviors in his workers, as well as transforming their interests for the benefit of the organization and improving their work performance [1]. In educational institutions, management inspires and motivates teachers (and these students) to achieve teaching objectives and be able to develop professionally and academically [31]. Among the main disadvantages of this leadership style are the need for the leader to be charismatic, that the objectives set are achieved in the long term and that it is not applicable in all cases (such as in already consolidated institutions).

2. METHOD

The methodology used was a systematic literature review (SLR), which substantiates and consolidates data and results that are available in publications on a given study topic [32]. This study is based on the methodology used in other literature reviews [33], [34], which is objective, explicit and replicable. This methodology also uses similar methods and is based on the PRISMA statement [35]. In addition, it is carried out using a sequence of seven stages established by Okoli and Schabram as shown in Figure 1 [36].

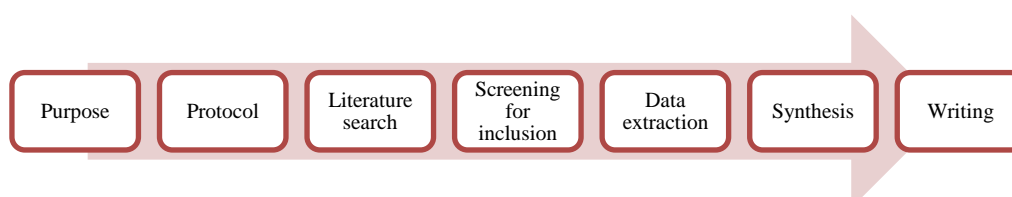


Figure 1. The stages followed in the systematic review [36]

The first stage refers to defining the purpose of the literature review. As mentioned before, the purpose is to explore the role of directors and teachers in achieving the objectives of educational institutions and identify the most recommended leadership style for educational institutions. Based on this, the review protocol was formed (Phase 2), which had the search period between 2019 and 2023 (five years). The reason behind this selection is the interest in collecting current information on the levels of leadership perceived in managers and teachers around the world, as well as the relevance given to this topic. As stated in previous research [37], [38], publications made in the last five years reveal the current state and trends of research on a topic.

The third stage refers to the literature search. The databases selected for this were Scopus (through ScienceDirect) and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO). The reason for the selection is due to the breadth and quality of publications (in the case of Scopus) [39] and because it is the network that gives visibility to Latin American literature (in the case of Scielo) [40]. To carry out the search in their respective search engines, a series of keywords were used such as “leadership”, “education”, “educational institution”, “managers”, among others. These and other keywords were used along with the Boolean operators AND or OR in custom search strategies for each database.

- Scielo: (leadership) AND (education OR “educational institution”)
- Scopus: ((leadership OR leader) AND (teacher OR director)) AND (education OR educational institution OR university OR school OR educational training)

The filters were added using the tools provided by each database. In this way, years, type of document and language of publication were filtered. Then, the fourth phase refers to the definition of the inclusion and exclusion criteria as presented in Table 1.

This first search returned a total of 1153 documents. Considering the inclusion and exclusion criteria previously stated, the selection of the articles was carried out by the main author (SHS), who was in charge of the initial filters and a superficial reading of the articles. When doubts were found about whether or not to include a study, two other authors made a judgment on the article in question (JCS and MDP). In a more exhaustive review, in addition to the selection carried out by the three authors, two other authors (MAD and AMT) issued their judgment in case articles that were included were discarded or articles that should be discarded were entered. The entire article selection process is shown in detail in Figure 2.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Articles focused on leadership applied in educational institutions.	Articles focused on leadership applied in other organizations.
Articles published from 2019 to the present.	Articles published before 2019.
Articles published in SciELO or Science Direct.	Articles published in other databases.
Qualitative and quantitative research articles.	Review articles, book chapters, opinion articles, reviews, and dissertations.
Articles written in Spanish, English or Portuguese.	Articles written in other languages.

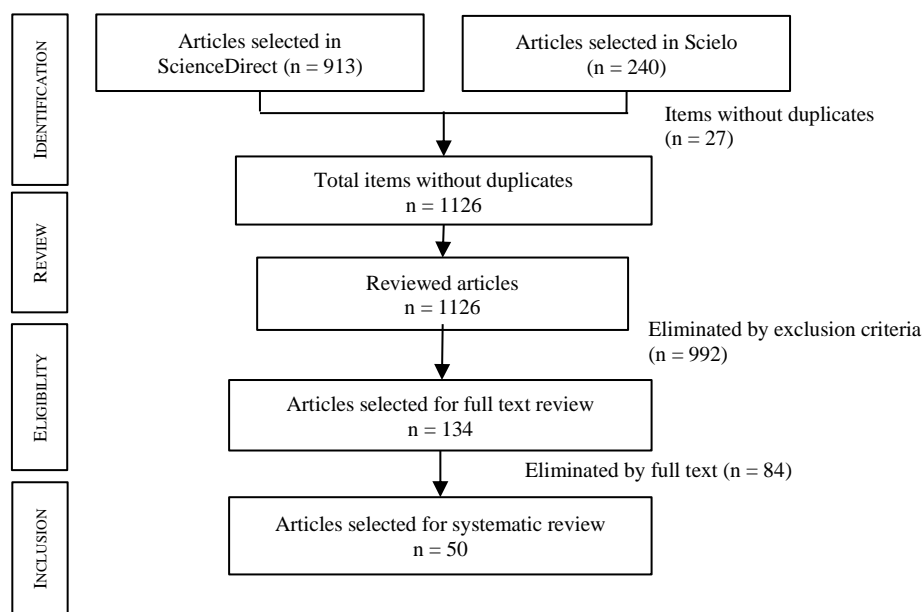


Figure 2. Item selection flowchart (PRISMA method)

The fifth stage refers to data extraction, which was carried out in a database in MS Excel, in which the objectives, methods, main results and conclusions of the fifty articles were extracted. The information was systematized in such a way that it could respond to the objectives set out in this review. Also, the bibliographic information was extracted in Excel in .csv format for the elaboration of the graphs. In the sixth stage, the data were synthesized from the MS Excel database. The data were organized to elaborate the narrative part of the results section. Finally, the last stage refers to the writing, which is presented in the following sections.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

The 50 publications selected after the search process detailed in Figure 1 and considering the inclusion and exclusion criteria detailed in Table 1 were subsequently analyzed to conduct the proposed systematic review. For this purpose, an Excel database was created with the most relevant aspects of each article, in order to facilitate the analysis of the information. Within this group of articles, it was observed that 45 (90.0%) of these are in Spanish, while the remaining 5 (10.0%) are in English. This distribution is shown in Figure 3.

From this figure, it can be seen that the vast majority of the selected publications are in Spanish, mainly because they were obtained from the SciELO database. This shows a preference for conducting research related to this topic in Spanish-speaking regions, as opposed to English-speaking regions. In addition, it should be noted that the 50 articles selected were research articles. Figure 4 shows the distribution of publications according to the databases consulted.

Figure 3 shows that 45 (90.0%) of the selected articles were obtained from the SciELO database, with the remaining 5 (10.0%) obtained from the ScienceDirect database. In addition, it should be noted that these values coincide with the distribution by language obtained in Figure 2, with the Spanish articles belonging to SciELO and the English articles to ScienceDirect. Figure 5 shows the selected publications distributed according to their year of publication.

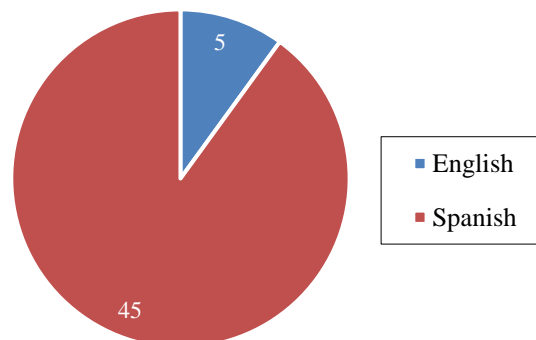


Figure 3. Distribution of publications by language

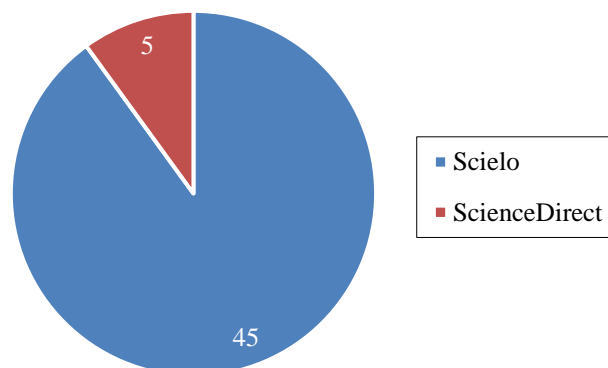


Figure 4. Distribution of publications by database

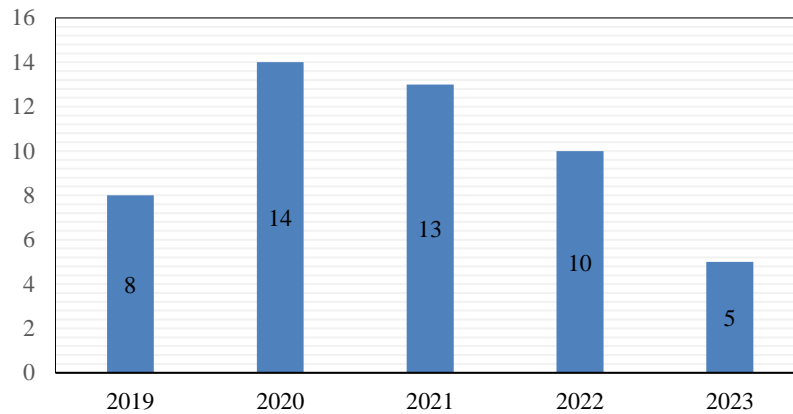


Figure 5. Distribution of publications by year of publication

Figure 5 shows a decreasing trend with respect to the number of publications per year focused on the subject of interest. A considerable increase is observed from 2019 to 2020, the latter being the year with the highest number of selected publications, 14 (28.0%) for this case. After this year, a decrease in the number of articles is observed, with only 5 (10.0%) selected in the current year 2023. In this regard, it is important to note that this is still an ongoing year, so this number does not reflect the total number of publications on this topic that will be published this year. However, this graph seems to indicate that situations such as the pandemic could have influenced the interest in research on leadership in educational organizations, especially in the face of severe problems such as this one. Additionally, Figure 6 shows the distribution of the selected articles according to the country where each research was conducted.

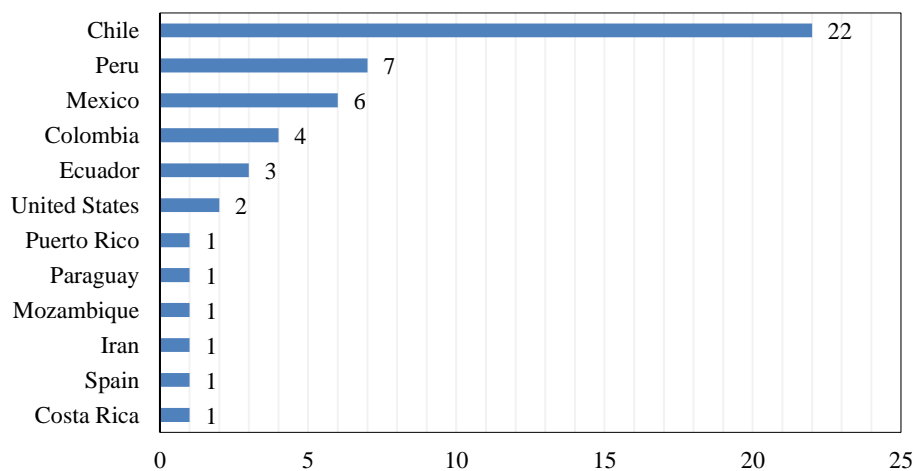


Figure 6. Distribution of articles by country

In addition, the VOSviewer software was used to analyze the content of the publications by analyzing their keywords, both in English and Spanish. For this purpose, a minimum value of 3 occurrences was defined to associate them and assemble the bibliometric network. In this case, it was not necessary to eliminate any keyword, since all of them were related in some way to the main topic, which is leadership. Having selected 16 keywords, the bibliometric network was generated from them as presented in Figure 7. From this, it can be seen that the most used keywords are “liderazgo” and “leadership”, being present in 20 (40.0%) and 18 (36.0%) of the selected publications.

From this figure, it can be seen that the most relevant keywords have been grouped into four clusters differentiated by color. In order of importance, red, green, blue and yellow clusters are observed, with 6, 5, 3 and 2 terms respectively.

The red cluster represents the general topic of the systematic review, with terms such as “leadership” or “educational management”. The green cluster covers academic concepts such as education or teachers' job satisfaction, as well as one of the most frequently mentioned types of leadership, transformational leadership. The blue cluster focuses on the concept of learning, in addition to leadership applied to education. Finally, the yellow cluster focuses on the concept of the pandemic, highlighting what was observed in Figure 4, regarding the impact that this situation had on research on leadership in educational institutions.

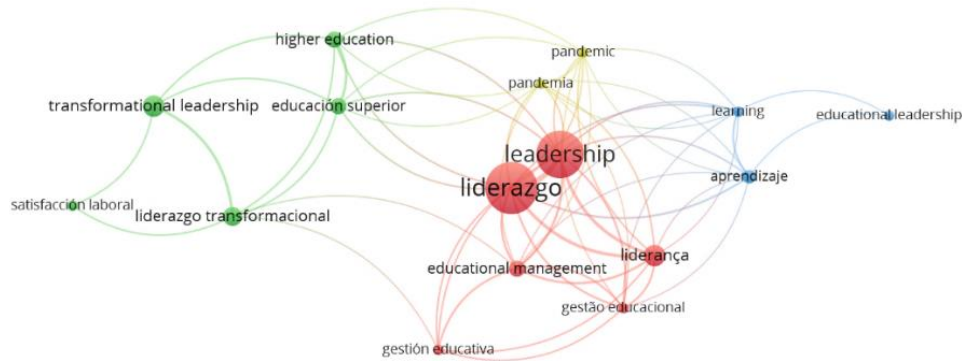


Figure 7. Bibliometric network with keywords of highest occurrence

Additionally, the presence of words that refer to the same concept, but in different languages, whether Spanish, English or even Portuguese, stands out. Thus, words such as “leadership”, “liderazgo” and “liderança” correspond to the same concept, being present in 20 (40.0%), 18 (36.0%) and 7 (14.0%) articles respectively. Something similar occurs with the keywords referring to the academic field such as “gestión educativa”, “educational management” and “gestão educacional”, or even regarding the types of leadership evaluated, as in the case of “liderazgo transformacional” and “transformational leadership”. When considering that these keywords have been the most common within the group of selected articles, it is possible to affirm that an adequate selection of these was made.

The selected research articles sought to analyze some aspect of the various parties involved in educational institutions. Within this group of publications, 7 (14.0%) of them focused on students, 17 (34.0%) focused on teachers, 12 (24.0%) focused on administrators, 4 (8.0%) focused on administrative personnel, and the remaining 10 (20.0%) sought to analyze more than one of these groups at a time. In turn, these investigations were developed at different educational levels, with 1 (2.0%) article conducting its research at the pre-school level, 10 (20.0%) at the elementary level, 8 (16.0%) at the middle school level, 11 (22.0%) at the high school level, and 20 (40.0%) at the school level in general (elementary and middle school). Table 2 presents the instruments used during data collection in the selected articles.

These instruments were used to evaluate the levels of leadership present in educational institutions at different academic levels. From the type of instruments used, it can be observed that the research collected focused on acquiring information about leadership in the educational environment through the evaluation of the people involved in education. This with the purpose of analyzing aspects such as the perception of the effectiveness of the leadership shown within the institutions, or the type of leadership preferred or most appropriate to be applied in their academic activities. For this purpose, widely known instruments such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire or the Vanderbilt education leadership questionnaire (VAL-ED) were applied.

Table 2. Instruments used in selected publications

Type of instrument	Number of articles	References
Questionnaire	19	[41]–[59]
Interview	15	[60]–[74]
Survey	14	[75]–[88]
Group discussion	1	[89]
Documentary	1	[90]

3.2. Discussion

The objective set in this review was to explore the role of directors and teachers in achieving the objectives of educational institutions. To do this, the research articles were analyzed, and the main results were classified according to educational levels. In preschool, managers showed a marked concern for safeguarding the well-being of children and their families, which allowed the formation of a strong sense of identity in the people involved [60], [61]. Constant training to improve the perception and knowledge of teachers was key to encouraging interaction between them and innovating work strategies [56], [62], [70], [90]. In a previous study conducted in Peru, it was shown that preschool teachers need to develop pedagogical strategies that do not affect the socioemotional development of children and, therefore, affect their concentration [91]. To this end, in preschool educational practice, it is necessary to encourage collaborative work with students, dialogue continuously with them and implement playful strategies that retain their attention [92]. Leadership in preschool requires constant accompaniment of children to provide them with experiences that motivate them to work individually and collectively; so, leadership strategies must focus on this point.

In primary school, it was evident that principals promoted collaboration between teachers and their self-sufficiency, which allowed improving educational quality and the formation of communities within their institutions [41], [67], [69], [88], [89]. In addition, during the leadership evaluations, managers and teachers showed low levels of leadership and little knowledge of pedagogical innovation strategies and methodologies, which decreases their participation in the activities of the institution [43], [65], [82], inability to resolve conflicts [42] and poor support from teachers [68], [75], [77]. In primary school, leadership characterized by autonomy and greater authority of principals and teachers in decision-making is required. This leadership contributes to improved learning, generates engagement between teachers and the management team, establishes clear and defined objectives and therefore improves the quality of primary education [93].

At the higher level, students develop their own leadership styles, and this must be considered by teachers for a more efficient training process [45]. Different types of leadership are observed within the teams made up of students, as well as the need to encourage innovation in teachers and managers to make institutions more resilient to changes in the environment. Previous research shows that it is essential to establish strong public policies that vindicate the current role of rectors and ensure their applicability from the institutional level in order to improve the quality of education in higher education [94]. On the other hand, it has also been shown that the participation of the entire educational community benefits the personal, work, social and professional training of teachers and students [95]. Thus, in the practice, it is necessary to advocate for policies that improve quality and collaborative work at the university level.

The second objective was to identify the importance of having strong leadership in educational institutions. Several studies have shown that strong leadership is required to achieve the growth of universities and reduce the negative psychosocial effects of weak leadership [44], [54], [58], [79]. Furthermore, it is observed that leadership styles based on the support, stimulation and inclusion of individuals generate better results within groups of students, since they increase their creativity and encourage their entrepreneurial spirit [76], [80]. Other types of leadership, such as pedagogical and service leadership, support teachers' job growth, improve their performance and create a better organizational climate [57], [59], [86]. Directive leadership positively influenced the educational quality of an institution [81]. Contrary to this, other studies show that emotional leadership has a negative impact on teachers' motivation and affects their leadership capacity [50], [66], [71], [78].

There is a marked preference for the transformational leadership style, since it was the most appropriate style for the growth of educational institutions, increasing the effectiveness and job satisfaction of teachers and reducing work stress [49], [51], [53]. Likewise, transformational leadership, adopting an inclusive approach, also increased students' satisfaction [47], [72], allowing them to carry out their activities carried out by teachers with greater enthusiasm [46], [48], [52], [83], [87]. A previous study showed that there is a positive relationship between positive transformational leadership and improvement in the management performed by teachers [96]. This demonstrates the importance of this type of leadership to achieve the goals set in the institutions [97]. To do so, teachers must successfully promote an academic environment in which students feel satisfied and achieve personal, academic and professional growth [98].

The third objective was to identify the importance of strong leadership in educational institutions. Strong leadership had the effective ability to communicate and manage conflicts and solve problems [42]. In educational practice, teachers tend to focus more on taking responsibility for their practices than on promoting a better environment and more enriching experiences, in addition to the fact that much of the administrative and bureaucratic burden falls on the director, instead of being assisted by his or her teachers [68], [75], [77]. Furthermore, motivation during educational practice is essential to motivate teachers and strengthen the principal-teacher, teacher-student and principal-student bonds [55], [64], [85]. In this context, the adaptability of principals and teachers is crucial to ensure the quality of teaching and maintain a good work environment; a previous study [99] has already demonstrated the importance of adaptability and that this is achieved with a theoretical framework that supports adaptation and continuous training programs for those involved.

Finally, the role of educational leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the world is highlighted. It was observed that teachers adopted a strong pedagogical leadership to face the problems generated by this situation and to promote changes and improvements to adequately implement distance education. Moreover, as a consequence of these complex situations that were imposed, teachers were able to strengthen leadership styles such as shared, adaptive, resilient and transformational, in order to be able to perform well within the new normality [63], [74]. Leadership styles such as transformational or transactional were fundamental for the design of efficient strategies to face the problems that arose as a result of the pandemic, there being a direct relationship between the application of these leadership styles and the efficiency in the implementation of the strategies. Good leadership is important to generate change within educational institutions, especially in times of crisis where quick and organized responses are required from the people in charge [73], [84]. Training leaders with these characteristics through training programs is crucial to respond to future crises that may affect the global education system.

4. CONCLUSION

The importance of good leadership within educational institutions was evident. Directors and teachers must guarantee a good educational experience that allows for a solid training of students. The collaboration and self-sufficiency of teachers are fundamental for the growth of institutions and the fulfillment of their objectives at all educational levels. Likewise, it is necessary to improve the leadership capabilities of directors and teachers through training programs so that they become more participants in the teaching-learning process.

Transformational leadership was considered the most efficient to achieve a positive impact on the educational environment and promote the development of educational institutions, in addition to allowing leaders to achieve greater effectiveness and satisfaction in their work environment. Likewise, it showed a positive influence on teacher and student satisfaction, teaching performance and reduced perceived work stress. In practice, all of the above is achieved through measures that encourage inspiration and the exchange of ideas to promote future changes between teachers and students.

The importance of having strong leadership in complicated contexts (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) was evident. Strong leadership motivates teachers and students, while providing solutions and adapting to new realities. The constant training of directors and teachers is crucial for the institution to provide quality educational service. To this end, continuous training of teachers and directors is recommended through talks, seminars and conferences provided by the same institution, which can take advantage of technological means to carry out these activities.

The present review had a Latin American focus, so it was carried out in Scielo and Scopus and articles in Spanish were considered. In addition, only the period 2019-2023 was considered, since articles with current results were searched. It is recommended, in subsequent revisions, to use other databases (Web of Science, ERIC or EBSCO Host) and to increase the period of publications to address the evaluation of this topic (leadership in educational institutions) over the years. Furthermore, this review tried to address all formative stages, so the results are general; Subsequent studies should focus on only one formative stage to obtain more specific results.

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