Evolving Research Themes on Transformational Leadership in Basic Education (2000–2025)

Tema Penyelidikan yang Berkembang mengenai Kepimpinan Transformasi dalam Pendidikan Asas (2000–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Transformational leadership has become a crucial field among scholars. Nevertheless, systematic reviews of the current state of transformational leadership in basic education are lacking. To address this gap, this review utilized Scopus as a data source, and articles were searched from 2000 to 2025, obtaining 493 relevant articles. Through bibliometric analyses, this review revealed the prominent trends in transformational leadership in basic education (RQ1). The descriptive analyses revealed a steady increase in the number of articles. Co-citation analyses identified the key co-cited authors and journals. Keywords with citation bursts and timeline figures demonstrate an expanding range of research themes. Additionally, this review incorporates content analysis to further explore the evolution of transformational leadership in basic education by dividing the research period into three phases: 2000-2007, 2008-2018, and 2018-2025 (RQ2). The three stages of research development are theoretical construction, growth, and innovation. It was found that during 2000-2007, research on transformational leadership in basic education mainly focused on theoretical adaptation. From 2008 to 2018, the study focused on the mechanisms of transformational leadership in school organizations. The 2018-2025 phase extends its applicability to technological change and multicultural environments and further develops an innovation paradigm. This review contributes to the effective implementation and optimization of transformational leadership strategies in basic education and holds significant academic and practical value.

Keywords: Transformational leadership; CiteSpace; Bibliometric analysis; Content analysis

ABSTRAK

Kepimpinan transformasi telah menjadi bidang penting dalam kalangan sarjana. Namun begitu, tinjauan sistematik terhadap keadaan semasa kepimpinan transformasi dalam pendidikan asas masih kurang. Untuk menangani jurang ini, ulasan ini menggunakan Scopus sebagai sumber data, dan artikel telah dicari dari 2000 hingga 2025, memperoleh 493 artikel yang berkaitan. Melalui analisis bibliometrik, kajian ini mendedahkan trend yang menonjol dalam kepimpinan transformasi dalam pendidikan asas (RQ1). Analisis deskriptif menunjukkan peningkatan yang stabil dalam bilangan artikel. Analisis petikan bersama mengenai pasti pengarang dan jurnal utama yang dipetik bersama. Kata kunci dengan pecahan petikan dan angka garis masa menunjukkan rangkaian tema penyelidikan yang semakin berkembang. Di samping itu, ulasan ini menggabungkan analisis kandungan untuk meneroka lebih lanjut evolusi kepimpinan transformasi dalam pendidikan asas dengan membahagikan tempoh penyelidikan kepada tiga fasa: 2000-2007, 2008-2018 dan 2018-2025 (RQ2). Tiga peringkat pembangunan penyelidikan ialah pembinaan teori, pertumbuhan, dan inovasi. Didapati bahawa pada tahun 2000-2007, penyelidikan mengenai kepimpinan transformasi dalam pendidikan asas tertumpu terutamanya kepada penyesuaian teori. Dari 2008 hingga 2018, kajian tertumpu kepada mekanisme kepimpinan transformasi dalam organisasi sekolah. Fasa 2018-2025 melanjutkan kebolehgunaannya kepada perubahan teknologi dan persekitaran berbilang budaya dan seterusnya membangunkan paradigma inovasi. Kajian semula ini menyumbang kepada pelaksanaan berkesan dan pengoptimuman strategi kepimpinan transformasi dalam pendidikan asas dan memegang nilai akademik dan praktikal yang signifikan.

Kata kunci: Kepimpinan transformasi; CiteSpace; Analisis bibliometrik; Analisis kandungan

INTRODUCTION

Transformational leadership emphasizes that leaders do not influence followers through authority and transactional relationships but by stimulating followers' intrinsic motivation and pushing them to work towards common organizational goals (Hoang & Le, 2025; Li & Karanxha, 2024). This leadership style focuses on guiding organizational members' identification and intrinsic commitment, leading to organizational restructuring and quality improvement (Sliwka et al., 2024). Thus, transformational leadership in modern organizations is seen as an essential tool for promoting change and innovation (Paganin et al., 2025; Vermeulen et al., 2022). It is among the most inspiring and involves the leader's ability to encourage intellectual stimulation through motivation (Ismail et al., 2021). In addition, leaders can motivate followers in various ways and push members of the organization to put in much effort by using their charm and the development of the organization's goals (Zadok et al., 2024).

As leadership research continues, transformational leadership is widely used in management and organizations and is gradually being applied to education (Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023). The conceptual style was introduced to education by Leithwood, who extensively researched transformational leadership for school leaders (Li & Karanxha, 2024). Representative scholar Leithwood et al. (2020) emphasize that transformational leadership is a set of leadership behaviors that can enhance the problem-solving abilities of individuals and groups in educational reform. The success of schools as complex social organizations relies significantly on their leaders' managerial competencies and leadership style (Razak, Ghani, Radzi, & Zakariah, 2024). Educational leaders, especially principals and administrators, are often confronted with changing educational environments and societal expectations that require the ability to lead change (Abuhassira et al., 2024). In this context, transformational leadership has been identified as a crucial factor in enhancing school effectiveness and improving teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Li & Liu, 2022; Mydin et al., 2025). It helps schools respond to external challenges and internally fosters a culture of collaboration, innovation, and excellence (Menon, 2023). Many scholars have pointed out that transformational leadership is an important leadership style that supports teacher professional development and enhances school improvement (Vermeulen et al., 2022). Since the study emphasizes the value of transformational leadership in organizations, more investigation is required to see how transformational leadership corresponds to educational leadership strategies (Li & Karanxha, 2024).

Despite previous reviews, key knowledge gaps persist regarding transformational leadership (Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023). This is because previous reviews have tended to cover the development and application of transformational leadership in multiple areas (Li & Karanxha, 2024), while failing to focus on the specific needs and challenges of basic education. This generalization has limited researchers' overall understanding of the current state of transformational leadership (Affandie & Churiyah, 2022). Many articles exist on transformational leadership in basic education, so a comprehensive review is needed to summarize the existing vein of knowledge.

Based on the above formulation, the Scopus database was chosen as the article search platform for this review to explore the evolutionary track of transformational leadership in basic education from 2000 to 2025 through bibliometric and content analyses. The Scopus database has a resource advantage, with 60% more publications in the social sciences than the Web of Science (Maral, 2024). It can also monitor dynamically with daily updates, a timeliness that facilitates bibliometric research to capture new hotspots (Maral, 2024). A total of 493 articles were analyzed

using CiteSpace software. This review focuses on analyzing changes in trends, developing research themes, and research gaps in current research, exploring the implications for educational leadership practice, and providing insights into future research directions. Thus, this review addresses the following research questions：

RQ1: What are the most prominent trends in research on transformational leadership in basic education based on bibliometric analysis?

RQ2: What are the evolving research themes in transformational leadership in basic education based on content analysis?

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In the profound transformation of the global education governance system, the goal of quality education proposed by UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action is reshaping the direction of education reform in countries (Shulla et al., 2020). In the post-pandemic era, education systems face multiple challenges, such as improving quality and equity, coping with the technological revolution, and achieving sustainable development (Pan & Chen, 2021), which place unprecedented demands on the strategic capabilities of school leaders (Karadag, 2020). It is worth noting that with the penetration of educational management theory in education, the school effectiveness accountability system has been gradually established, prompting school leaders to transform from traditional administrative management (Li & Liu, 2022). In this context, school leaders have been given a more complex role, not only to deal with an increasingly rigorous accountability system but also to have the strategic leadership ability to lead the faculty to adapt to the challenges and changes of a new era (Li & Liu, 2022).

In the theoretical development of educational leadership research, the management model dominated by bureaucratic control in the early stages has gradually exposed its limitations in the rapidly changing educational ecology (Karadag, 2020). Scholars have proposed new theoretical frameworks for educational leadership to adapt to this change (Kwan, 2020). Transformational and instructional leadership are two typical leadership models that have received considerable attention in contemporary research on educational management (Velarde et al., 2022). Both are often seen as complementary leadership practices in the school improvement process, although each has its own characteristics. The main differences between the two are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Transformational and Instructional Leadership

	Transformational Leadership	**Instructional Leadership**
Primary focus	Vision, culture, innovation	Teaching and learning quality
Leadership practices	Inspiring teachers, fostering collaboration, building trust	Curriculum development, teaching supervision, student assessment
Change Pathway	Values-driven, cultural transformation	Improvement of curriculum and teaching
Development Focus	Organizational construction and efficiency improvement	Achievement enhancement

It is evident that instructional leadership is more focused on teaching and learning, while transformational leadership is concerned with organizational development and effectiveness (Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023). Research on transformational leadership has shown that this

type can help address various educational challenges, such as teacher professional development, organizational climate, and improving school performance (Wilson Heenan, Lafferty, & McNamara, 2024). Researchers have also noted that transformational leadership can create an environment that fosters and encourages innovation and trust by involving educators, stakeholders, and even students in the change process (Velarde et al., 2022). The theory of transformational leadership was first proposed in enterprise management (Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). However, subsequent studies have shown that this theory applies to enterprise organizations and fits the core needs of educational management (Siangchokyoo et al., 2020).

Bass and Avolio (1994) proposed a model with four dimensions for assessing and measuring transformational leadership: (a) idealized influence, with an emphasis on school leaders setting a moral role model and fostering a shared sense of mission and values; (b) inspirational motivation, a way for school leaders to foster collective responsibility and resilience through educational visioning; (c) intellectual stimulation, which focuses on encouraging teachers to explore innovative teaching practices; and (d) individualized consideration, which emphasizes providing teachers with personalized support and professional growth (Bass & Avolio, 1994). In addition, Bass (1985) developed a tool to measure transformational leadership, the Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023). The MLQ covers the four dimensions of transformational leadership described above, assessing leaders' performance across multiple leadership styles (Li & Karanxha, 2024). Other scholars have proposed various theoretical frameworks and models to understand and implement transformational leadership in educational management (Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023). For example, the five practical models proposed by Kouzes and Posner (Abu-Tineh et al., 2008). These frameworks provide guidance and strategies for leaders to practice transformational leadership in education effectively (Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION

The Scopus database was selected as the article search platform for this review because of its broad coverage and inclusion of high-quality research outputs worldwide, which provides researchers with highly representative data. To ensure the article's relevance in basic education contexts, a Boolean logic-based search query was constructed: (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("transformational leadership" AND (school* OR classroom* OR "basic education" OR "primary school" OR "secondary school" OR "high school" OR "K-12"))) AND NOT TITLE-ABS-KEY ("higher education" OR university* OR college* OR nursing OR business OR management OR physician OR medical OR hospital) AND PUBYEAR > 2000 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar")). This search strategy required the inclusion of basic education settings (e.g., schools, classrooms) while actively excluding non-relevant contexts such as higher education and non-educational domains (e.g., medical, business). The literature type was limited to journal articles ("ar"), and the language was restricted to English. The search timeframe spanned from 2000 to 2025. This approach comprehensively captures studies on transformational leadership in basic education. The retrieved documents were exported as plain text files, resulting in 514 records. Manual screening based on

relevance to the topic, through a sequential review of titles, keywords, and abstracts, excluded unrelated literature, resulting in a final dataset of 493 articles.

BIBILIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

Bibliometric analysis objectively reflects the distribution patterns and development of research in specific fields in different periods through quantitative analysis of research data (Ahmad, Nasir, Halmi, & Adnan, 2024). The advantage is that it breaks through the limitations of a single piece of literature for overall visualization and statistical analysis (Ahmad et al., 2024). CiteSpace software is a literature information visualization software. Its advantage is that it conducts a co-occurrence analysis of keywords, journals, and authors in a specific domain literature based on co-citation analysis (Li & Tinmaz, 2024). Currently, CiteSpace software is widely used to analyze the interrelationships among knowledge and the changing trends at the research frontier (Li & Tinmaz, 2024). Based on this, this review adopts a bibliometric analysis method. Meanwhile, the visual literature analysis software CiteSpace was used to conduct a bibliometric analysis of transformative leadership in basic education to answer RQ1. This study chose CiteSpace software because the keyword co-occurrence analysis figure it exports contains keywords with citation bursts and a timeline visualization of keywords. The traditional keyword co-occurrence figure presents a co-word network formed by keywords with a high occurrence frequency. In contrast, CiteSpace's keyword timeline can display the distribution characteristics, structural relationships, and knowledge evolution of research topics of related keywords within different time ranges (Li & Tinmaz, 2024). Moreover, keywords with citation bursts can detect theoretical trends or new topics emerging within a specific period (Li & Tinmaz, 2024). Through the analysis of the prominent keywords within a specific period, it can indirectly help solve RQ 2 and more accurately capture the research hotspots within each research phase.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

To explore the evolution of research themes on transformational leadership in basic education, this sreview adopted a content analysis method. Unlike bibliometric analysis, content analysis can reveal the trend of thematic changes by systematically sorting the content of the literature (Nicmanis, 2024). Specifically, based on CiteSpace software, this study conducted a phased analysis of high-frequency keywords and emergent words. The researchers also combined the literature titles, abstracts, and keyword information exported from the Scopus database to examine the changing trajectories of research focus in different periods. During the analysis, the distribution characteristics of keywords at each stage were summarized and compared, and the evolution path of the theme was extracted. This method is conducive to understanding the dynamic evolution process in transformational leadership research and can also help identify emerging themes and research gaps, thereby providing more explanatory support for answering RQ2. Furthermore, the content analysis method compensates for the limitations of simple bibliometric analysis in revealing the logic of knowledge evolution by strengthening the understanding of the connotation of the topic and its evolutionary relationship and enhancing the analytical value of the overall research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION (RQ1)

This section focuses on the descriptive statistics and visual graph analysis, and a discussion of the retrieved 493 articles using CiteSpace software. The results of the bibliometric performance analysis reveal the basic information of this field. Combined with visualization tools, it can help researchers initially grasp the development trends.

PUBLICATION TRENDS AND DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Based on 493 articles collected from the Scopus database, this study systematically reviews the research evolution of transformational leadership in basic education. As shown in Figure 1, from 2000 to 2025, this field presents significant stage development characteristics, and the changes in the annual number of publications directly reflect the changes in the attention of the academic community on this topic. The data show that the average annual number of published documents from 2000 to 2007 remained in single digits. However, this trend changed after 2008. Although there was a decline in 2009, the overall output of articles began to show a steady growth trend. In particular, it entered a significant growth channel after 2018. It is worth noting that 2020 marked a turning point in development, with the annual growth rate of the number of articles increasing significantly to 48. Although the citation data in 2023 slightly declined, the research output remained strong.

From the perspective of development stages, this field can be divided into three characteristic stages: (1) the exploratory stage (2000-2007), with a relatively weak research foundation; (2) the growth period (2008-2018), during which the theoretical system was gradually improved; and (3) the outbreak period (2019-2025). This evolutionary track highlights the academic community's continuous attention to the issue of transformational leadership in basic education. This indicates that an internationally influential research cluster has been formed in this field. The constant rise in current research enthusiasm provides abundant academic support for subsequent theoretical innovation and practical application.
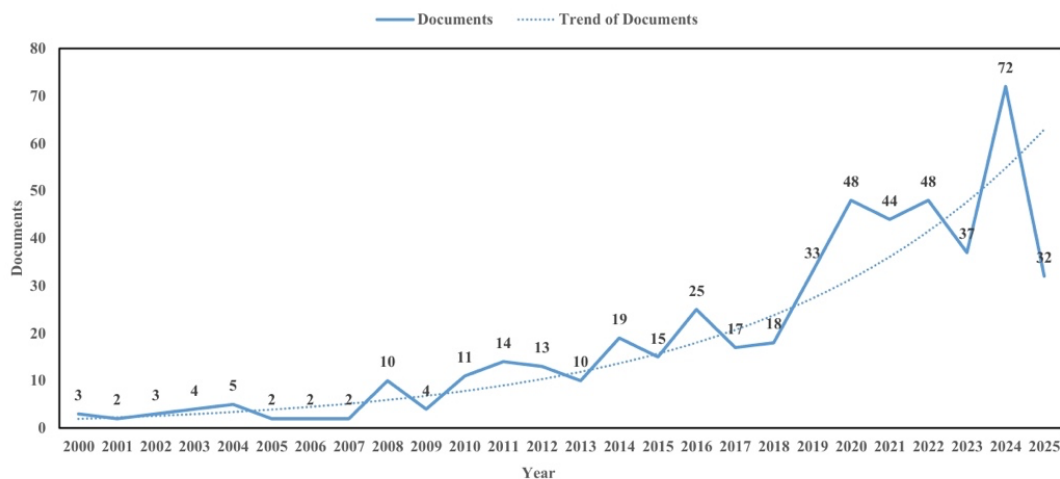

FIGURE 1. Time trend of the publications

ANALYSIS OF AUTHOR CO-CITATION

Author co-citation analysis helps to understand the representative scholars and core research strengths of a research area (Martín-Martín et al., 2021). This demonstrates the interconnectedness and impact of research among scholars in the field (Martín-Martín et al., 2021). This review conducted an author co-citation network analysis using the CiteSpace software. Co-citation analysis identified the top five influential authors. Table 2 presents the information on these five authors.

TABLE 2. The top 5 influential authors based on the co-citation analysis

Rank	Author	Publications	Citations	Average citations
1	Imron Arifin	6	38	6.33
2	Ibrahim Bafadal	6	73	12.17
3	Yulius Rustan Effend	6	17	2.83
4	Mahmut Polatcan	6	147	24.5
5	Mehmet Şükrü Bellibaş	6	172	28.67

Each of these five authors had six relevant studies, and their citation frequency and average number of citations showed significant differences, reflecting the impact of different authors on academic research. Specifically, Imron Arifin ranked first, with a cumulative total of 38 citations, focusing on transformational leadership policies in Indonesian schools, with a particular emphasis on the role of principal transformational leadership practices in contributing to student character education. Ibrahim Bafadal ranked second with a total of 73 citations and an average of 12.17 citations, with his research topic focusing on the relationship between transformational leadership and primary school teacher performance. And in conjunction with Imron Arifin, they explored the indirect effects of leadership on student character. Yulius Rustan Effend ranked third with 17 citations. His research continues to deepen the exploration of transformational leadership at the principal level, further supporting the central role of the principal in the school improvement process.

Significantly, Polatcan and Bellibaş ranked fourth and fifth, with 147 (average 24.5) and 172 (average 28.67) total citations, respectively, as they collaborated to advance the development of an integrative leadership perspective emphasizing transformational leadership and instructional leadership in an integrative modeling study. Polatcan's quantitative research revealed the mediating and moderating effects of transformational leadership on teacher-level variables, thereby expanding the boundaries of theoretical application. At the same time, Bellibaş pays more attention to the path of transformational leadership to promote teacher innovation capacity, which is highly relevant in the current international trend emphasizing educational innovation and teacher professional development.

ANALYSIS OF JOURNAL CO-CITATION

Two key factors that measure the impact of journals in a field are the number of articles published and the number of citations, and co-citation journal analysis can help researchers identify the most influential journals (Martín-Martín et al., 2021). This review counted the top five journals with the highest number of citations in transformational leadership research in basic education using CiteSpace software. Table 3 presents the analysis results.

TABLE 3. Top 5 key journals ranked by number of citations.

Rank	Journal	Articles	Average Citations	IF
1	《*Educational Management Administration & Leadership*》	29	29.1	2.7
2	《*Journal of Educational Administration*》	28	66.9	2.1
3	《*International Journal of Educational Management*》	16	22.2	2.4
4	《*International Journal of Leadership in Education*》	15	17.6	2.4
5	《*Educational Administration Quarterly*》	12	93.7	2.4

Educational Management Administration & Leadership ranked first, with 29 documents and an average of 29.1 citations. The journal's research mostly adopts quantitative methods and pays attention to the impact of transformational leadership on teacher behavior, revealing the mechanism of leadership practice through mediation models. In addition, the journal incorporates studies from many countries, including the Netherlands, Turkey, Spain, and Nigeria, reflecting its strong cross-cultural applicability. The *Journal of Educational Administration* published 28 related articles with a high average citation frequency of 66.9, ranking second, showing the high recognition of its research results. Compared with the former, the journal contains a higher proportion of qualitative studies and more context-sensitive topic settings, such as the study on the relationship between workplace bullying and leadership styles, which has broadened the perspective of transformational leadership research. In addition, the journal includes research on the development of such measurement instruments.

The third-ranked journal, *International Journal of Educational Management*, had an average of 22.2 citations. The journal has a relatively balanced ratio of qualitative and quantitative research, and the research includes leadership styles and sources of power, which provides a perspective for understanding the role of transformational leadership in different organizational cultures. Meanwhile, the *International Journal of Leadership in Education* contributed a large number of cross-cultural research results, with 15 articles and an average citation frequency of 17.6. It contains an analysis of transformational leadership practices in basic education in different national educational contexts. Although *Educational Administration Quarterly* published the fewest articles, it had the highest average citation rate of 93.7. This represents the impact of earlier published research, especially the results on the impact of transformational leadership on student achievement, which continues to influence subsequent research. Overall, the journals, although each with its focus, have collectively contributed to the ongoing development and practice of transformational leadership in basic education.

ANALYSIS OF KEYWORD CO-OCCURRENCE

The top 20 keywords with citation bursts created by CiteSpace are shown in Figure 2, which shows that the use of keywords in the study of transformational leadership in basic education has changed in stages since 2000. Early emergent keywords, such as "commitment," "job satisfaction," and "student achievement," were mostly focused on the period from 2008 to 2018. Subsequently, keywords such as "instructional leadership" and "transactional leadership" emerged between 2015 and 2020. The strength of "transactional leadership" reaches 4.77, showing that scholars' interest in comparing and analyzing different leadership styles has increased significantly. The explosion of keywords such as "innovation" and "digital leadership" in 2020 indicates that the research boundary of transformational leadership is expanding in the context of digitalization.

FIGURE 2. Top 20 Keywords with the Strongest Citation Bursts

The keyword timeline figure systematically reveals the evolution of research themes. As can be seen in Figure 3, "transformational leadership" has been at the center of the map since 2000 and is the intersection of the various clustering structures. Several keyword clusters around it, such as "instructional leadership", "school leadership", and "teacher performance", show continuous expansion along the timeline. Keywords such as "digital leadership," "teacher self-efficacy," and "innovation" highlight the extension of current research into these themes. In addition, several keywords appear across clusters, such as "motivation" and "organizational climate," connecting different research themes, indicating that transformational leadership research is moving from a single perspective to a multi-factor interaction and cross-thematic integration stage of development.
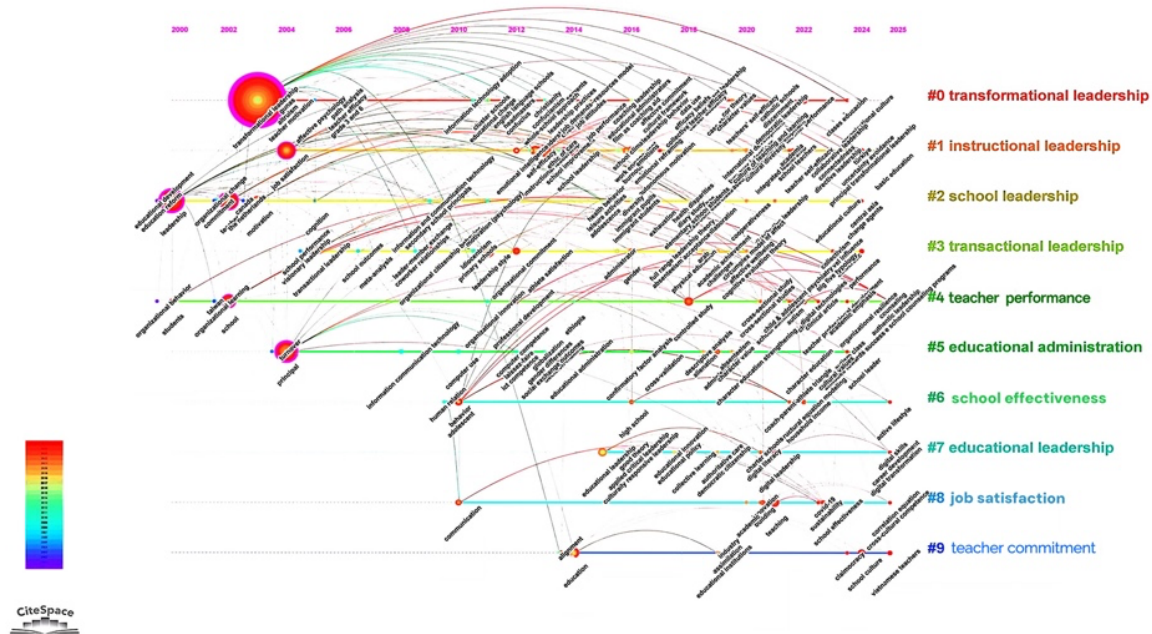
FIGURE 3. The keyword timeline 2000-2025

CONTENT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION (RQ2)

PHASE I (2000-2007)

From 2000 to 2007, global education reform swept all countries, and the theory of transformational leadership gradually entered the field of education from business management (Marks & Printy, 2003). Due to the successful application of the theory in business management, researchers began to consider its applicability in a basic education setting (Marks & Printy, 2003), examining the impact of different leadership styles on student learning outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008). Transformational leadership theory is widely understood in the articles as a 'motivational' leadership style (Robinson et al., 2008). At this stage, researchers focused on developing concepts and models of transformational leadership. Other researchers have focused on the differences between transactional and transformational leadership.

Principals are often seen as key transformational leaders who spearhead school reform and build positive cultures (Barnett & McCormick, 2004). Research between 2000-2007 focused on the potential for school leaders to actively collaborate on teaching matters to improve teaching quality and student achievement (Marks & Printy, 2003).For example, exploring when transformational and instructional leaders co-exist in an integrated form of leadership, as measured by the quality of teaching and student achievement (Marks & Printy, 2003). According to research, transformational leadership can be crucial to school organizational restructuring and change, fostering a positive school climate, and increasing the general efficacy of educational institutions (Marks & Printy, 2003). Additionally, it can positively affect teacher organizational commitment, which can greatly increase their devotion to the school (Leithwood et al., 2020). At this stage, researchers have empirically found that transformational leadership positively affects teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023).

Scholars have subsequently pointed out that roles in school organizations are not limited to principals, but that teachers, heads of departments, and administrators also play a crucial role (Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023). Leithwood et al. (2020) defined transformational leadership as leadership behaviors that enhance the school change process. In her study, she emphasized that transformational leadership should be viewed as a leadership trait dispersed throughout all levels of the organization and not limited to the principals alone(Leithwood et al., 2020). This perspective broadens the understanding of transformational leadership as a product of collaboration within the school rather than merely an individual leader's style. Leithwood et al. (2020) argued that transformational leadership frameworks should include greater teacher participation and ownership to effectively promote educational reform. This perspective further explores the distribution of power and responsibility between principals and teachers (Karakose et al., 2023).

PHASE II (2008-2018)

Globally, research on transformational leadership in basic education has entered the stage of theoretical deepening and application expansion (Hallinger, 2013). Characterized by inspiring followers, building a shared vision, and stimulating intelligence, transformational leadership has been shown to positively impact both business and educational settings (Shatzer et al., 2014). Between 2008 and 2018, the exploration and application of transformational leadership made significant progress, driven by educational reform, technological change, globalization trends, and increasing demands on the quality of education (Hallinger, 2013).

The education system's focus on improving student academic achievement has pushed transformational leadership research toward more refined empirical analysis (Sun et al., 2017). The transformational leadership behaviors exhibited by principals in the study, such as setting an example, cultivating team goals, and maintaining high-performance expectations, were associated with improved student achievement (Day et al., 2016). Researchers have used different research methods and models at this stage and reported different results on the impact of transformational leadership on student achievement (Li & Karanxha, 2024). Researchers have developed scales and looked for antecedents and consequences that influence school transformational leadership practices (Sun et al., 2017). Some scholars have proposed new models adapted to the educational context to better explain the application of transformational leadership (Li & Karanxha, 2024). The synergistic influence model suggests that principal transformational leadership behaviors indirectly affect student achievement through the collective efficacy of teachers, and it views the principal as a leader who supports the growth of school members together (Li & Karanxha, 2024).

During this phase, school leaders, such as principals, have come to recognize that transformational leadership is not only a means of motivating teachers (Day et al., 2016). Instead of relying solely on personal charisma, principals embed transformational leadership into school culture through a structured leadership model to achieve organizational change (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Most research has demonstrated that transformational leadership promotes teachers' intrinsic motivation and professional commitment by building trust (Eliophotou Menon, 2014), encouraging collaboration, and shaping a shared vision (Hallinger, 2013). School leaders recognize that transformational leadership needs to empower teachers and other organizational members in a distributed manner so that the school shares responsibility for change (Day et al., 2016).

Moreover, from to 2008-2018, more an increasing number of studies from non-Western regions gradually entered the academic landscape. These studies have provided empirical evidence from cross-cultural perspectives and enriched the understanding of transformational leadership

behaviors at the basic education level. Typically, transformational leadership practices in non-Western countries are profoundly influenced by cultural values, institutional arrangements, and teacher role expectations (Firmansyah et al., 2022). Many scholars in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East have also begun to explore the relationship between transformational leadership and teacher trust, collective efficacy, and instruction (Firmansyah et al., 2022). It is shown that transformational leadership exhibits diversity and adaptability in basic education in different institutional and cultural settings (Li & Karanxha, 2024).

Furthermore, the research field has progressively focused on the mediating variables of transformational leadership (e.g., school culture and teacher traits) and has attempted to enhance the explanatory power of theories by integrating multiple leadership models (Li & Karanxha, 2024). Scholars have also deepened their research on the specific practice and cross-cultural adaptation of transformational leadership in schools, especially its applicability in non-Western contexts, typically in China (Liu, 2015). However, at this stage, transformational leadership theory required a more explicit conceptual definition (Berkovich, 2016). Berkovich (2016) expressed in his study that, at that time, there was a high degree of correlation between the different dimensions of transformational leadership, and it was difficult to distinguish between them. In addition, transformational leadership theory confuses leadership behaviors with their effects and has a problem of logical circularity (Berkovich, 2016).

PHASE III (2019-2025)

During 2019-2025, the great challenge for the international community is overcoming the limitations of education systems with a single education model (Rogers & Nichele, 2020). The global educational environment is undergoing dramatic changes, especially in post-epidemic recovery and accelerated technological development, creating new demands for transformational leadership in basic education(Zadok & Benoliel, 2023). At this stage, more adaptive and innovative connotations have been given to transformational leadership in basic education(Li & Liu, 2022). School leaders' understanding of transformational leadership gradually shifted from macro-regulation to enhancing organizational flexibility and innovation (Zadok et al., 2024). For example, researchers have adopted the theoretical frameworks of self-concept leadership theory and social exchange theory to explore how transformational leadership influences teacher innovative behaviors through organizational and personal factors (Vermeulen et al., 2022). In this phase, multiple empirical models by Western researchers focused on transformational leadership in teacher satisfaction (Metaferia et al., 2023; Mouazen & Hernández-Lara, 2023; Paganin et al., 2025) and the mechanisms of teacher trust and organizational commitment (Thomas et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Velarde et al.(2022) examined the impact of transformational leadership on the cultural intelligence of school leaders and the organisational health of secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur. Evidence from Shava and Heystek's (2021) study in South Africa suggests that principals support teachers by providing rewards and incentives with individualised consideration, creating a school culture that promotes successful academic progress. Comparative analyses revealed that Western studies emphasized psychological mechanisms and individual teacher motivation(Paganin et al., 2025), while non-Western countries focused more on school organizational culture and collective efficacy. This difference reflects how transformational leadership manifests in different institutional cultures.

Additionally, the complexity of educational contexts brought about by globalization and technological developments has prompted researchers to focus on how transformational leadership functions in dynamic environments (Li & Karanxha, 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic,

educational leaders had to respond to the unprecedented changes experienced in the teaching and learning environment. At this stage, many countries shifted to distance education and online learning models (Berkovich & Hassan, 2023). Baroudi's (2022) study revealed transformational leadership of Arab female's digital practices in education. These practices helped them maintain their roles and organizational performance. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a rethinking of the traditional education model across the education sector, and educational leaders had to lead the digital transformation of their environments (Connolly et al., 2023). School principals need to be more knowledgeable of digital transformation leadership (Berkovich & Hassan, 2023). There is limited research on how to become a digital transformational leader because traditional leadership models focus on governance and the physical learning environment (Connolly et al., 2023). Shifts in educational paradigms have broadened the understanding of transformational leadership (Sliwka et al., 2024). Thus, scholars' research perspective has shifted to exploring transformational leadership in digital education in schools and its practical outcomes (Berkovich & Hassan, 2023).

Existing research shows that Western countries are more advanced in digital governance and platform building, and their research focuses more on technology empowerment, information management, and learning system integration (Sliwka et al., 2024). While non-Western countries face multiple barriers in terms of culture, resources, and technological literacy, their research emphasizes the digital literacy of transformational leaders(Connolly et al., 2023). This comparison provides ideas for future models of digital transformational leadership adapted to different cultures and educational systems.

Meanwhile, the integrated education model has attracted much academic attention, with most previous research focusing on the impact of transformational leadership on student achievement and neglecting its relationship with teacher instructional practice (Bellibaş et al., 2021). In the 2019-2025 phase, the researcher examined the relationship between the integrated educational leadership model and teacher instructional practices (Bellibaş et al., 2021). One researcher collected data from 1,200 teachers in Turkey and examined the relationship between principal instructional and pedagogical goals to study teacher transformational leadership and professional learning (Karacabey et al., 2022). There was also a study in China that collected data from a province in China using integrated school leadership. This study investigated how transformational leadership can be utilized in teacher leadership practices (Li & Liu, 2022). The researchers concluded that transformational leadership in schools can be improved by principals engaging teacher leaders in practice (Li & Liu, 2022). This research type helps school leaders incorporate transformational leadership practices to better meet the growing demands of educational reform by maximizing teachers' instructional practices (Bellibaş et al., 2021).

This trend suggests that transformational leadership has gradually transitioned from a motivational and charismatic leadership model to a collaborative, empowering, and structured form of leadership (Mydin et al., 2025). By way of comparison, Western studies are more oriented toward quantitative tests of path mechanisms and the effects of instructional interventions, whereas non-Western studies focus on the integrated and interactive mechanisms of organizational culture, teacher engagement, and leader identification.

Previously, transformational leadership has been relatively less discussed in promoting non-Western countries (Kılınç et al., 2020), with a gradual increase in this phase from 2019 to 2025. One study examined the important role of transformational leadership in promoting the Ethiopian School Improvement Programme (SIP), which aims to improve student academic performance (Gao et al., 2024). Zhang et al. 's (2022) study explored transformational leadership, professional learning communities (PLCs), and teacher job satisfaction from the perspective of Chinese

principals. Similarly, researchers surveyed 822 principals in China to explore teacher collective efficacy from the perspective of transformational leadership principals, as well as the mediating role of professional learning communities (PLCs) and the moderating role of teachers' perceptions of trust in their principals (Zhang & Liu, 2023). These findings enrich the role of transformational leadership in basic education settings in non-Western countries. A comparison of the studies reveals that Western studies favored the construction of instructional improvement mechanisms, while the non-Western studies emphasized the cultural mediation path of leadership engagement (Alanoglu & Karabatak, 2025).

Although research in recent years has expanded the theoretical outreach and empirical path of transformational leadership, the following gaps and challenges still exist in current research. The theoretical construction of digital transformational leadership is still in its early stages(Baroudi, 2022). Especially in blended learning, there is still a lack of systematic empirical support on how transformational leaders motivate teachers to participate and how to coordinate the relationship between technological resources and teaching goals. The number of cross-cultural comparative studies is limited, and there is a lack of in-depth exploration of the adaptive mechanisms of leadership behavior in different institutional contexts (Alanoglu & Karabatak, 2025). More comparative studies based on multi-country samples should be conducted to analyze the similarities and differences in leadership strategies in different cultural systems (Alanoglu & Karabatak, 2025).

IMPLICATIONS

Based on bibliometric and content analyses in basic education, this study identifies the main research trends and the thematic evolution of transformational leadership. These findings have important implications for educational policy and school management. Policymakers should promote educational leadership at the basic education level, incorporate transformational leadership into educational policy planning and training systems, and provide institutional support and resources for basic education. School leaders should also take the initiative to change their management concepts and adopt transformational leadership as an essential path to promote educational quality improvement and organizational innovation. In addition, future research should focus on developing transformational leadership in the context of digital transformation in education. For example, the specific mechanism of its role in the hybrid learning education, exploring how it can effectively cope with the complexity and uncertainty of the education scene through technology integration and teacher collaboration, to expand the applicability and practical value of the theory in the emerging education ecosystem.

LIMITATIONS

While this review summarizes influential authors and journals, it is primarily based on citation frequency and fails to explain the specific reasons for the higher citation rates. In addition, the bibliometric analysis in this review is highly dependent on the Scopus database. Although Scopus is broadly representative of international academic literature coverage, it still has some limitations in including regional research results, which may result in some important studies being excluded. This review only focused on journal articles in English and excluded books and unpublished

content, which may lead to missing content in the scope of the study, thus affecting the comprehensiveness of the findings. Therefore, future studies should incorporate multiple databases for cross-validation to further enhance the interpretation and analysis of the evolution of research themes.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the bibliometrics of authoritative articles in a specific field can help researchers understand the development status and trends of academic research more objectively. Based on the Scopus database, a bibliometric and content analysis of 493 articles from to 2000-2025 was conducted to analyze the research trends and themes of transformational leadership in basic education. First, the bibliometric analysis revealed that transformational leadership research within schools is trending upward year after year. The performance analysis of bibliometrics statistically counted the top five co-cited authors and journals. The keywords with citation bursts and timeline figures demonstrated that keyword use showed phases. Besides, this review incorporates a content analysis approach by dividing the time into three phases (2000-2007, 2008-2018, and 2018-2025). This reveals that transformational leadership research within basic education in the 2000-2007 phase was dominated by theoretical adaptation, while in the 2008-2018 phase, it focused on the mechanisms of its influence in school organizations. The 2019-2025 phase expands its applicability to technological change and multicultural environments and pays more attention to its association with variables such as teacher psychology. Demonstrating transformational leadership increases diversity and complexity in responding to basic educational needs. Overall, this review provides a systematic reflection on transformational leadership in basic education, emphasizing its adaptability and sustainability in an increasingly complex educational environment. Additionally, this study provides beneficial insights for policymakers and school administrators, encouraging them to strengthen focus on transformational leadership in basic education as a critical way to improve educational quality and promote organizational effectiveness through institutional design and conceptual change.

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