

# Reconceptualising Student-Centred Leadership in Southeast Asian Schools: A Systematic Review of Practices, Mediating Mechanisms, and Student Outcomes

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**Abstract:** This study reconceptualises student-centred leadership in Southeast Asian schools by a systematic synthesis of empirical evidence on leadership practices, mediating mechanisms, and student outcomes. Although student-centred leadership has gained policy attention in response to learning inequities, student disengagement, and socio-emotional challenges, research in Southeast Asia remains fragmented across leadership typologies and reform agendas. Guided by the PRISMA framework, this study conducted a systematic literature review of empirical journal articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. Database searches conducted in January 2026 identified 2,338 records. Following rigorous screening and eligibility procedures based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 32 studies published between 2010 and 2025 were included in the qualitative synthesis. Data were analysed using integrative thematic synthesis. The findings indicate that student-centred leadership is not a singular model. Instead, it constitutes a multidimensional constellation of practices encompassing instructional alignment, relational trust-building, ethical climate formation, pedagogical innovation, and sustained teacher professional development. Leadership influence on students is predominantly indirect and operates through mediating mechanisms such as teaching quality, professional learning structures, school climate, and curriculum enactment. These practices are consistently associated with improved student engagement, wellbeing, agency, autonomy, and learning outcomes. However, implementation is frequently constrained by hierarchical governance structures, accountability pressures, uneven teacher readiness, and digital inequality. This study advances a mechanism-based and contextually grounded reconceptualisation of student-centred leadership in Southeast Asia. It strengthens leadership scholarship by foregrounding mediating pathways and decentring Western-dominated typologies, while offering practical and policy implications for leadership preparation, reform alignment, and equity-oriented school improvement.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk merekonseptualisasi student-centred leadership di sekolah-sekolah Asia Tenggara melalui sintesis sistematis terhadap bukti empiris mengenai praktik kepemimpinan, mekanisme mediasi, dan hasil belajar siswa. Meskipun student-centred leadership semakin mendapat perhatian kebijakan sebagai respons terhadap ketimpangan pembelajaran, rendahnya keterlibatan siswa, dan tantangan sosial-emosional, penelitian di Asia Tenggara masih



*terfragmentasi dalam berbagai tipologi kepemimpinan dan konteks reformasi pendidikan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan systematic literature review yang dipandu oleh kerangka PRISMA dengan menelusuri artikel jurnal empiris pada basis data Scopus dan Web of Science. Pencarian pada Januari 2026 menghasilkan 2.338 artikel. Setelah proses penyaringan dan penilaian kelayakan berdasarkan kriteria inklusi dan eksklusi yang telah ditetapkan, 32 artikel yang terbit antara tahun 2010–2025 dianalisis melalui pendekatan integrative thematic synthesis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa student-centred leadership bukanlah model tunggal, melainkan konfigurasi multidimensional yang mencakup penyelarasan instruksional, pembangunan kepercayaan relasional, pembentukan iklim etis sekolah, inovasi pedagogis, serta penguatan pengembangan profesional guru secara berkelanjutan. Pengaruh kepemimpinan terhadap siswa bersifat tidak langsung dan dimediasi oleh kualitas pengajaran, struktur pembelajaran profesional, iklim sekolah, serta implementasi kurikulum. Praktik-praktik tersebut berkorelasi dengan peningkatan keterlibatan, kesejahteraan, agensi, otonomi, dan hasil belajar siswa. Namun, implementasinya sering dibatasi oleh struktur tata kelola yang hierarkis, tekanan akuntabilitas, kesiapan guru yang tidak merata, dan kesenjangan digital. Secara ilmiah, penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan menawarkan konseptualisasi baru berbasis mekanisme dan konteks regional terhadap student-centred leadership di Asia Tenggara. Studi ini memperkaya diskursus kepemimpinan pendidikan dengan menekankan jalur mediasi kepemimpinan serta memberikan implikasi praktis dan kebijakan bagi penguatan kepemimpinan sekolah yang berorientasi pada siswa.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership scholarship has undergone significant transformation over the past decade as traditional hierarchical and administrator-driven models have been increasingly questioned. Leadership approaches that have prioritised compliance, efficiency, and accountability are now widely regarded as insufficient in addressing persistent learning inequities, student disengagement, and socio-emotional challenges in contemporary schooling systems. Antoninis et al. (2023) argue that governance regimes focused predominantly on performativity have failed to resolve deep structural disparities in education. Starkey (2019) similarly contends that rigid and standardised leadership frameworks struggle to respond to the growing complexity and diversity of student needs. Rabbi (2025) further demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified these systemic weaknesses by exposing structural fragilities and uneven institutional preparedness. In this context, Sprong et al. (2019) emphasise that educational systems increasingly require leadership models that are flexible, inclusive, and responsive to students' lived realities. These developments have contributed to a normative and policy-

level shift towards leadership orientations that place students at the centre of decision-making processes.

Within this evolving landscape, student-centred leadership has emerged as an influential yet conceptually underdeveloped construct. Li and Karanxha (2022) describe student-centred leadership as an approach that foregrounds student learning, voice, participation, and well-being as primary considerations in leadership decision-making. Robinson and Gray (2019) argue that leadership practices aligned with student-centred principles involve instructional coherence, relational trust, pedagogical alignment, and sustained focus on student learning outcomes. Despite growing scholarly attention, the concept remains analytically diffuse. Much of the existing research examines leadership effects through established typologies such as instructional leadership, distributed leadership, collaborative leadership, or transformational leadership without explicitly clarifying how these practices collectively constitute a student-centred orientation. As a result, student-centred leadership often functions as a normative aspiration rather than as a clearly operationalised and empirically synthesised framework.

The conceptual ambiguity surrounding student-centred leadership is particularly pronounced in Southeast Asia, where educational leadership operates within complex policy, governance, and sociocultural environments. Huang and Chen (2021) observe that reforms across Asian contexts have gradually shifted from government-driven control toward governance models emphasising inclusion and stakeholder participation. Liu and Werblow (2019) note that countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines have incorporated learner voice, well-being, and equity into national reform agendas. However, empirical studies in the region frequently examine isolated dimensions of leadership, including instructional leadership, technology leadership, curriculum reform, and teacher professional development, without integrating these strands into a coherent student-centred leadership framework. Consequently, the field lacks a consolidated understanding of how diverse leadership practices interact within Southeast Asian schools to shape student engagement, agency, well-being, and academic outcomes.

At the broader theoretical level, there remains limited consensus regarding which leadership approaches most effectively support student-centred outcomes. Banwo et al. (2021) associate collaborative leadership with culturally responsive engagement, trust-building, and shared vision. Printy and Liu (2020) and Traver-Martí et al. (2021) highlight distributed leadership as a mechanism for empowering teachers and encouraging bottom-up instructional improvement. Kilag and Sasan (2023) emphasise the importance of instructional leadership in aligning curriculum, assessment, and professional development with intended learning outcomes. Nevertheless, Kallio et al. (2021) caution that leadership practices shaped by accountability regimes can restrict professional autonomy and reinforce hierarchical control. Schlegel (2024) similarly argues that leadership enacted within high-stakes accountability environments may inadvertently constrain student agency despite espousing reform-oriented rhetoric. These tensions indicate that leadership typologies alone are insufficient to explain how leadership translates into student-centred outcomes. Greater attention is required to examine leadership

practices as enacted processes and to identify the mediating mechanisms through which leadership influences student-level outcomes.

Another significant limitation within the existing literature concerns geographical representation and epistemic imbalance. Zhan et al. (2023) observe that systematic reviews in educational leadership research are heavily concentrated in Western contexts, thereby limiting the development of contextually grounded theory in Southeast Asian education systems. Although numerous reviews have synthesised evidence on instructional leadership, distributed leadership, and school improvement, relatively few have explicitly positioned students as the central beneficiaries of leadership practice. Moreover, limited attention has been given to examining how leadership practices operate within centralised governance systems, reform-driven policy environments, and culturally hierarchical schooling contexts that characterise many Southeast Asian countries. This underrepresentation restricts theoretical advancement and reduces the visibility of regionally specific leadership enactments in global scholarship.

In addition to conceptual and geographical gaps, there is insufficient synthesis of the mediating pathways through which leadership influences students. Leithwood et al. (2020) demonstrate that leadership effects on student learning are predominantly indirect and operate through teacher capacity, instructional quality, and school climate rather than through direct leader-student interaction. Robinson and Gray (2019) similarly emphasise the importance of pedagogical alignment and relational conditions in linking leadership to student outcomes. However, empirical studies in Southeast Asia rarely organise findings according to clearly articulated mediating mechanisms such as professional learning structures, relational trust, ethical climate-building, technological enablement, or curriculum adaptation. Without systematic synthesis, the field lacks explanatory precision regarding how leadership practices translate into specific student outcomes, including engagement, agency, well-being, and academic achievement.

Responding to these gaps, this study reconceptualises student-centred leadership in Southeast Asian schools through a systematic review of empirical research published between 2010 and 2025. Drawing on Scopus and Web of Science databases and guided by the PRISMA framework outlined by Moher et al. (2009), the review synthesises 32 empirical studies examining leadership practices and associated student outcomes in Southeast Asian and comparable Asian contexts. Rather than treating student-centred leadership as a singular model, this review conceptualises it as a constellation of interrelated leadership practices encompassing instructional leadership, relational and ethical climate-building, pedagogical and technological innovation, and sustained teacher professional development.

The study seeks to answer the following research question: What student-centred leadership practices reported in schools in Southeast Asia are associated with specific student outcomes, and through what mediating mechanisms do these practices operate? By integrating previously fragmented strands of research, this review contributes to theoretical clarification and contextual grounding in four ways. First, it moves beyond dominant Western leadership typologies by synthesising regionally grounded empirical evidence. Second, it identifies and

categorises mediating mechanisms through which leadership practices shape student engagement, agency, well-being, and learning outcomes. Third, it consolidates disconnected findings across instructional, distributed, collaborative, technological, and curriculum-focused leadership research into a coherent analytical framework. Fourth, it advances conceptual precision by reframing student-centred leadership as an empirically grounded configuration of practices embedded within specific institutional and cultural conditions.

Through this reconceptualisation, the study contributes to strengthening theoretical development in educational leadership by positioning students not merely as recipients of school improvement efforts but as central referents in leadership practice. In doing so, it responds to calls for more contextually sensitive, practice-oriented, and outcome-linked leadership research that reflects the realities of Southeast Asian schooling systems while contributing to global debates on student-centred educational reform.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a systematic literature review design to reconceptualise student-centred leadership in Southeast Asian schools through a synthesis of empirical evidence on leadership practices, mediating mechanisms, and student outcomes. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses framework developed by Moher et al. (2009) to ensure transparency, replicability, and procedural rigour. The review protocol consisted of four sequential stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and qualitative synthesis.

### ***Identification***

The identification stage aimed to capture the breadth of empirical research addressing student-centred leadership practices in school contexts. Conceptual boundaries were clarified through preliminary scoping of scholarly literature, dictionaries, and encyclopaedic sources to refine key constructs associated with student-centred education and school leadership. This process informed the development of comprehensive search strings that combined student-centred constructs with school leadership terminology.

Two internationally recognised bibliographic databases, Scopus and Web of Science, were selected because of their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals and established indexing standards. Database searches were conducted in January 2026. The search strings were constructed to capture variations of student-centred constructs, including student voice, student agency, student well-being, student engagement, and learning-centred terminology, combined with leadership identifiers such as leadership, leader, principal, and headteacher. The complete search strategies are presented in Table 1.

The initial search yielded 2,338 records, comprising 1,421 articles from Scopus and 917 from Web of Science. All records were exported to a reference management system for subsequent filtering and de-duplication.

**Table 1. Search Strategy and Database Query**

Database	Search String	Date of Access
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY("student-cent*" OR "learning-cent*" OR "learner-cent*" OR "student voice" OR "student agency" OR "student wellbeing" OR "student well-being" OR "student engagement")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY(school AND (leader* OR leadership OR principal* OR headteacher*)))	January 2026
Web of Science	TS=("student-cent*" OR "learning-cent*" OR "learner-cent*" OR "student voice" OR "student agency" OR "student wellbeing" OR "student well-being" OR "student engagement") AND TS=(school AND (leader* OR leadership OR principal* OR headteacher*))	January 2026

### **Screening**

The search process involved title, abstract, and full-text screening with eligibility determined through predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Following the identification stage, all retrieved records were screened for relevance. The screening phase was conducted in two stages. First, automated database filters were applied to restrict results to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2010 and 2025 within the social sciences domain. Conference papers, books, review articles, and in-press publications were excluded to maintain consistency in publication type and ensure methodological quality.

This filtering process removed 1,782 records, leaving 556 records for further assessment, consisting of 293 from Scopus and 263 from Web of Science. Duplicate entries were identified through comparison of titles, authors, publication years, and digital object identifiers, resulting in the removal of 10 duplicate records. Consequently, 546 unique articles were retained for full-text review.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during screening are summarised in Table 2. These criteria were established to ensure alignment with the study's objective of synthesising empirical evidence on student-centred leadership practices and associated student outcomes within Southeast Asian school contexts.

**Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Time line	2010 – 2025	< 2010
Literature type	Journal articles	Conference papers, Books, Reviews
Publication Stage	Final	In Press
Subject	Social science	Other subject area

### **Eligibility**

During the eligibility phase, the 546 full-text articles were examined in detail to determine substantive relevance. Each article was evaluated against three primary conditions: explicit engagement with school leadership practices, empirical investigation of practices aligned with student-centred constructs, and identifiable student-related outcomes such as engagement, agency, well-being, participation, or academic achievement.

Articles were excluded if they were conducted outside school settings, did not substantially address leadership practices, lacked empirical data, or did not report

student-related outcomes. Studies outside Southeast Asian or contextually comparable Asian settings were excluded unless they contributed directly to understanding leadership enactment within similar governance and policy structures.

A total of 514 articles were excluded at this stage due to lack of alignment with the research focus or absence of empirical relevance. Following eligibility assessment, 32 empirical studies met all criteria and were included in the final qualitative synthesis.

### ***Data Abstraction and Analysis***

An integrative thematic synthesis approach was employed to analyse and synthesise findings from the included studies. This approach enabled the integration of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research within a coherent analytical framework suitable for reconceptualising student-centred leadership.

Data extraction was conducted using the predefined framework presented in Table 3. Extracted information included publication year, geographical context, research design, data collection methods, participants, reported leadership practices, implementation challenges, and student-related outcomes.

The analytic process proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive coding identified reported leadership practices and associated student outcomes. Second, axial coding grouped practices according to functional categories: including instructional alignment, relational trust-building, ethical climate formation, technological enablement, curriculum innovation, and professional development structures. Third, constant comparative analysis was employed to identify mediating mechanisms linking leadership practices to specific student outcomes. These mechanisms included teacher capacity development, pedagogical coherence, relational climate, inclusive discipline, and technological facilitation.

Throughout the analytic process, reflexive memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions and emerging patterns. Analytical trustworthiness was strengthened through collaborative discussion among the authors, with disagreements resolved through consensus. Two external experts in educational leadership reviewed the thematic structure to assess conceptual clarity, analytical coherence, and alignment with the review objectives. Their feedback informed refinement of the final thematic configuration.

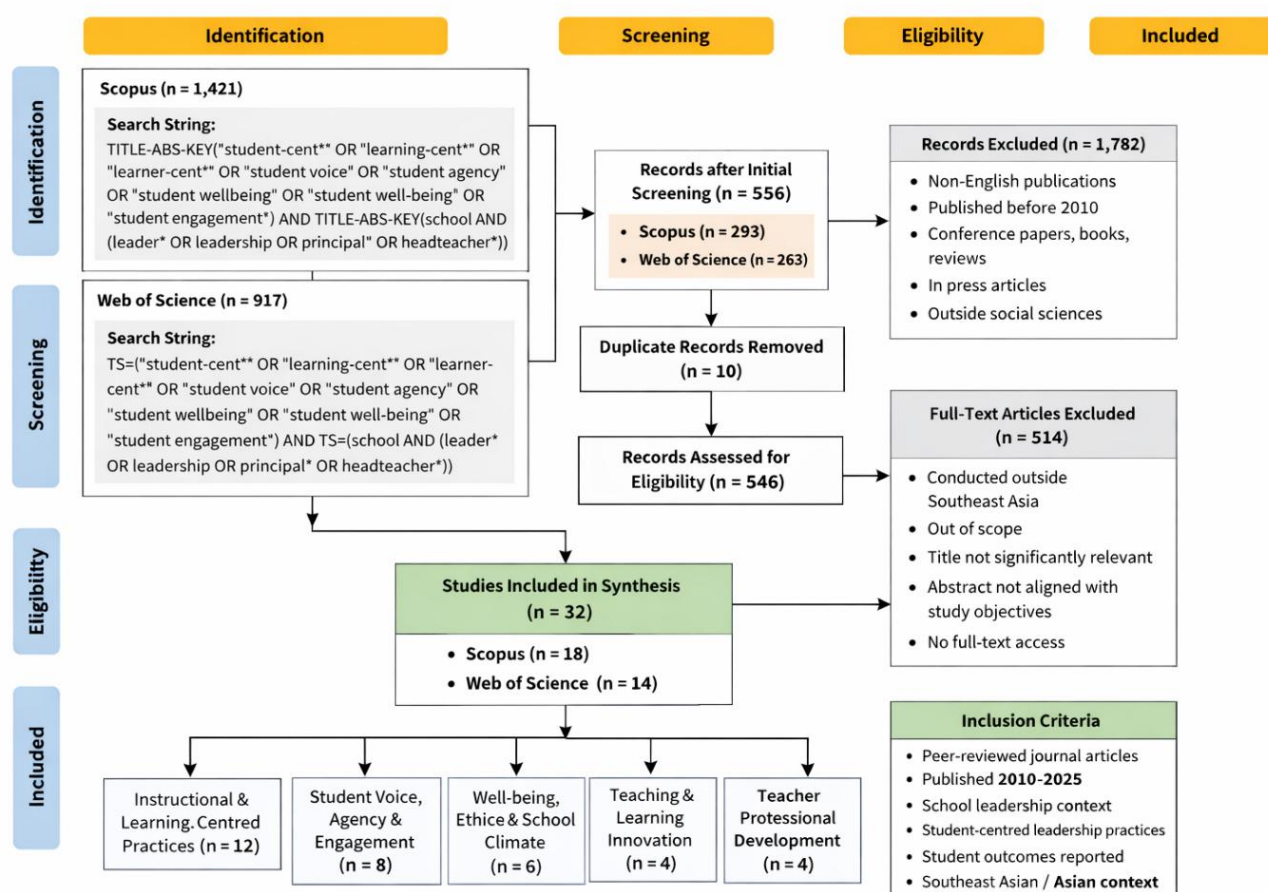
The guiding research question for this synthesis was: What student-centred leadership practices are reported in Southeast Asian schools, what student-related outcomes are associated with these practices, and through what mediating mechanisms do these relationships operate?

**Table 3.** The Criteria Used for the Extraction of Information  
From the Selected Articles

No.	Criteria	Category	Justification
1	Year of publication	2010–2025	To ensure relevance to contemporary school leadership research
2	Student-centred leadership	Leadership actions, behaviours, and decision-making processes oriented	To identify leadership practices that explicitly



	practices	towards students (e.g., learning-centred practices, student voice, student agency, student wellbeing, student engagement)	prioritise students, in line with the research question
3	School context	Southeast Asian school settings	To ensure contextual alignment with the research focus
4	Research design	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods	To capture a broad range of empirical evidence
5	Data collection methods	Surveys, interviews, case studies, focus groups, observations	To examine how leadership practices and outcomes are investigated
6	Participants	School leaders, teachers, students	To reflect multiple perspectives on leadership practices
7	Implementation challenges	Barriers and facilitators related to student-centred leadership practices	To understand contextual factors influencing implementation
8	Student-related outcomes	Student learning, engagement, wellbeing, participation, and agency	To identify outcomes associated with student-centred leadership practices



**Figure 2.** PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process (Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, 2009)



Figure 2 presents the PRISMA flow diagram adapted from Moher et al. (2009), illustrating the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. A total of 2,338 records were identified through Scopus (n = 1,421) and Web of Science (n = 917). After preliminary screening, 1,782 records were excluded, leaving 556 records, from which 10 duplicates were removed. The remaining 546 articles underwent full-text assessment, resulting in the exclusion of 514 studies for reasons including irrelevance, scope limitations, or lack of access. Ultimately, 32 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. The diagram ensures transparency and enhances the rigour and replicability of the review process in accordance with established systematic review reporting standards.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the systematic synthesis of 32 empirical studies published between 2010 and 2025. The analysis addresses the research question by identifying student-centred leadership practices in Southeast Asian and comparable Asian school contexts, the student-related outcomes associated with these practices, and the mediating mechanisms through which leadership influence operates. The integrative thematic analysis of the reviewed studies yielded a structured set of findings at two analytical levels.

At the empirical level, five major themes emerged from the integrative thematic analysis: (1) Student-Centred Leadership and School Leadership Practices; (2) Student Voice, Agency, and Engagement; (3) Student Wellbeing, Ethics, and School Climate; (4) Teaching, Learning Innovation, and Curriculum Reform; and (5) Teacher Professional Development and Capacity Building. Across themes, leadership influence on students was predominantly indirect and mediated through teacher practices, school climate, relational trust, curriculum alignment, and professional learning structures. At a higher level of synthesis, these empirical themes were conceptually integrated into three overarching theme of student-centred leadership: participatory leadership practices, relational and cultural mediation, and student-focused outcome pathway.

#### *Theme 1: Student-Centred Leadership and School Leadership Practices (8)*

**Table 4.** Student-Centred Leadership and School Leadership Practices

Authors	Title and Year	Country	Aim	Methodology	Finding	Journal
Suryadi & Budimansyah (2016)	Advance school leadership, progress teaching approach and boost learning	Indonesia	Examine effect of school leadership on instruction and learning	Quantitative; 1,082 students, 180 teachers	Leadership significantly influences student-centred instruction and learning	The New Educational Review
Razak et al. (2024)	Developing Leadership for Pre-service Teachers	Malaysia	Examine leadership development	Conceptual	Leadership development enhances instructional quality and engagement	Akademika
Yuliana et al. (2025)	Learning leadership	Indonesia	Develop leadership	Mixed methods; R&D	Learning leadership	Cakrawala Pendidikan

Kulophas & Kim (2020)	model for vocational principals Thailand 4.0 principals and technology	Thailand	model Explore leadership and technology	Qualitative case study	fosters student wellbeing Tech-supported leadership enables student-centred teaching	Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences
Damanik et al. (2025)	Leadership and teacher performance	Indonesia	Analyse leadership effects	Quantitative; path analysis	Leadership and climate support student-centred learning	Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Terapan Universitas Jambi
Ghavifekr & Wong (2022)	Technology leadership in Malaysian schools	Malaysia	Investigate ICT leadership	Quantitative survey	ICT leadership improves engagement	International Journal of Asian Business & Information Management
Utaminingsih et al. (2024)	Professional competency through learning leadership	Indonesia	Analyse learning leadership	Quantitative; SEM	Learning leadership supports student-centred practice	FMIPA UNNES
Zhang et al. (2025)	Instructional leadership and engagement	China	Examine leadership and self-efficacy	Quantitative survey	Instructional leadership predicts engagement	Frontiers in Psychology

This theme captures empirical evidence demonstrating how school leadership practices oriented toward learning, instruction, and technological integration shape student-centred outcomes. Studies by Suryadi and Budimansyah (2016), Damanik et al. (2025), and Zhang et al. (2025) indicate that instructional and learning-focused leadership practices are significantly associated with student-centred instruction, teacher self-efficacy, and student engagement. These findings suggest that leadership influence operates primarily through strengthening instructional coherence and teacher capacity.

Research conducted in reform-oriented contexts further illustrates how leadership models aligned with national agendas such as Merdeka Belajar and Thailand 4.0 translate into student wellbeing and pedagogical transformation. Yuliana et al. (2025) show that learning leadership frameworks foster student wellbeing, while Kulophas and Kim (2020) and Ghavifekr and Wong (2022) highlight the role of technology leadership in enabling digital pedagogies that enhance engagement. Utaminingsih et al. (2024) demonstrate that learning leadership supports teacher competency development, thereby reinforcing student-centred classroom practice.

Collectively, these studies indicate that student-centred leadership at the school level is enacted through instructional guidance, climate formation, and technology integration. The mediating mechanisms most frequently identified include teacher self-efficacy, professional competence, school climate, and ICT

utilisation. Principals emerge not as administrative controllers but as facilitators of pedagogical improvement and institutional alignment with student-centred goals.

### ***Theme 2: Student Voice, Agency, and Engagement (4)***

**Table 5.** Student Voice, Agency, and Engagement

Authors	Title and Year	Country	Aim	Methodology	Finding	Journal
Dang (2025)	Mediating factors for student agency	Vietnam	Examine agency during reform	Qualitative case study	Trust and collaboration enable voice; hierarchy constrains agency	Frontiers in Education
Suyatno et al. (2022)	The Great Teacher	Indonesia	Conceptualise teacher characteristics	Qualitative phenomenology	Relationships central to engagement	Frontiers in Education
Lu'mu et al. (2023)	Humor and engagement	Indonesia	Examine humor and engagement	Quantitative; moderated mediation	Engagement mediated by relationship quality	Heliyon
Pham & Chau (2024)	Student engagement post-Covid	Vietnam	Examine engagement factors	Quantitative; SEM	Adaptive cognition predicts engagement	International Journal of Instruction

This theme foregrounds the relational and participatory dimensions of student-centred leadership. Dang (2025) demonstrates that school reforms may create formal opportunities for student participation; however, hierarchical norms can constrain the realisation of student agency. Trust-based relationships and shared school missions were identified as enabling conditions for authentic student voice. Similarly, Suyatno et al. (2022) reveal that students value relational qualities, interpersonal respect, and teaching competence as defining features of effective leadership and instruction.

Quantitative evidence further supports the relational mediation pathway. Lu'mu et al. (2023) show that teacher-related humour enhances student engagement through improved teacher–student relationship quality, while Pham and Chau (2024) find that adaptive cognition and behaviour predict engagement in post-pandemic contexts. Across studies, relational trust, psychological safety, and collaborative culture function as mediating mechanisms linking leadership orientation to student agency and sustained engagement.

Overall, the findings suggest that student-centred leadership becomes meaningful when participatory structures are supported by relational legitimacy. In centralised and authority-driven contexts, student participation risks remaining symbolic unless leadership actively reshapes school culture to support shared ownership and inclusive dialogue.

### ***Theme 3: Student Wellbeing, Ethics, and School Climate (5)***

**Table 6.** Student Wellbeing, Ethics, and School Climate

Authors	Title and Year	Country	Aim	Methodology	Finding	Journal
Utari et al. (2024)	Ethical climate	Indonesia	Examine ethical climate	Mixed methods	Ethical climate linked	Ethics in Progress

Suherman et al. (2025)	study Bullying prevention	Indonesia	Develop SCB strategies	Qualitative	to wellbeing Leadership supports student safety	Jurnal Pendidikan Islam
Liu et al. (2025)	Burnout and leadership	China	Examine transformational leadership	Quantitative; PLS-SEM	Leadership reduces burnout and improves environment	Acta Psychologica
Tanucan et al. (2025)	Exercise as punishment	Philippines	Delphi consensus	Delphi method	Punitive discipline harms wellbeing	Physical Culture and Sport
Yanuarto et al. (2025)	Quality schooling and SDG 4	Indonesia	Examine quality dimensions	Quantitative; SEM	Inclusive climate predicts engagement	Educational Process

This theme demonstrates that student-centred leadership extends beyond instructional practice to encompass ethical governance, disciplinary norms, and school climate. Utari et al. (2024) show that ethical school climate is positively associated with student wellbeing, intrinsic motivation, and relational trust. Suherman et al. (2025) highlight leadership-driven school capacity building as central to bullying prevention and student safety.

Conversely, Tanucan et al. (2025) reveal that punitive disciplinary practices undermine student wellbeing and contradict student-centred values. Evidence from special education contexts further indicates that leadership practices supporting teacher empathy and reducing burnout indirectly foster healthier learning environments for students (L. Liu et al., 2025). Yanuarto et al. (2025) reinforce the systemic dimension by demonstrating that inclusive learning environments predict student engagement and learning outcomes.

The mediating mechanisms identified within this theme include ethical climate formation, inclusive discipline, teacher wellbeing, and relational safety. Student-centred leadership thus involves moral and relational stewardship that supports both teacher and student wellbeing as integral components of learning improvement.

#### ***Theme 4: Teaching, Learning Innovation, and Curriculum Reform (8)***

**Table 7.** Teaching, Learning Innovation, and Curriculum Reform

Authors	Title and Year	Country	Aim	Methodology	Finding	Journal
Amin et al. (2020)	Mind mapping study	Indonesia	Examine motivation and understanding	Mixed methods	Mind mapping improves learning	Universal Journal of Educational Research
Mukminin et al. (2019)	Inclusive curriculum reform	Indonesia	Analyse reform	Conceptual	Inclusive curriculum promotes voice	CEPS Journal
Raswan et al. (2025)	Competency-based Arabic curriculum	Indonesia	Examine autonomy	Qualitative	Enhances engagement and autonomy	Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun
Errabo & Ongoco	Mobile learning	Philippines	Test mobile learning	Quasi-experimental	Improves engagement	Journal of Research in

(2024)	modules					Innovative Teaching & Learning IJLTELR
Jaaffar & Adnan (2025)	Metaverse-based learning	Malaysia	Identify CT challenges	NGT	Immersive learning enhances motivation	
Hawari & Noor (2020)	PBL in STEAM	Malaysia	Explore PBL	Qualitative	Promotes active learning	Asian Journal of University Education
Minsih et al. (2025)	Cultural literacy integration	Indonesia	Examine cultural pedagogy	Qualitative	Enhances engagement and identity	Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Terapan
Saprudin et al. (2025)	Gamified disaster app	Indonesia	Assess gamification	Experimental	Improves engagement and awareness	Jurnal Pendidikan Islam

This theme captures leadership-supported pedagogical innovation and curriculum transformation as core expressions of student-centred leadership. Studies demonstrate consistent associations between innovative instructional approaches and improved student engagement, motivation, autonomy, and conceptual understanding. Amin et al. (2020) show that mind mapping significantly improves conceptual understanding and motivation, while Errabo and Ongoco (2024) report that mobile learning modules enhance engagement and understanding.

Curriculum reform studies further illustrate the strategic role of leadership in enabling inclusive and competency-based education. Mukminin et al. (2019) and Raswan et al. (2025) highlight how inclusive and competency-based curricula promote student voice and autonomy. Jaaffar and Adnan (2025) and Saprudin et al. (2025) demonstrate that immersive and gamified technologies foster motivation and independent learning. Hawari and Noor (2020) and Minsih et al. (2025) emphasise culturally responsive and project-based pedagogies as pathways toward holistic student development.

Across these studies, leadership influence is mediated through curriculum flexibility, instructional experimentation, and technological enablement. Student-centred leadership emerges as an enabling condition for aligning policy reforms with classroom-level innovation and student learning needs.

### ***Theme 5: Teacher Professional Development and Capacity Building (7)***

**Table 8.** Teacher Professional Development and Capacity Building

Authors	Title and Year	Country	Aim	Methodology	Finding	Journal
Lim & Liang (2020)	TPD@Scale	Indonesia	Examine TLC impact	Case study	ICT-mediated PD improves teaching	Asia Pacific Education Review
Gao et al. (2010)	ICT leadership development	Singapore	Explore ICT integration	Mixed methods	Teacher leadership supports student-centred teaching	AJET
Dimmock et al. (2021)	Reform adaptation	Vietnam	Examine reform	Theoretical + empirical	PD central to reform take-up	IJED

Prasetyono et al. (2021)	Teacher competency improvement	Indonesia	Identify PD needs	Mixed methods	Training strengthens student-centred methods	IJERE
Inprasitha (2022)	Lesson study longitudinal	Thailand	Sustain LS-OA model	Longitudinal	Improves student-centred behaviours	IJLLS
Zulfikar et al. (2022)	Questioning strategies	Indonesia	Examine EFL strategies	Qualitative	Promotes engagement	Studies in English Language and Education
Gelizon (2024)	Inclusive classroom ABE	Philippines	Explore inclusive practice	Qualitative	Leadership encouragement supports equity	Environment and Social Psychology

The final theme identifies teacher professional development as a central mediating mechanism through which student-centred leadership influences classroom practice and student outcomes. Lim and Liang (2020) demonstrate how Teacher Learning Centres expand access to ICT-mediated professional learning, contributing to improved teaching and student learning outcomes. Inprasitha (2022) shows that sustained lesson study enhances teaching practices and student-centred behaviours over time.

Dimmock et al. (2021) and Prasetyono et al. (2021) reveal that reform implementation depends heavily on internal enablers, including school culture and professional development alignment. Zulfikar et al. (2022) and Gelizon (2024) emphasise the importance of questioning strategies and inclusive pedagogies supported by leadership encouragement. Gao et al. (2010) further demonstrate how early leadership potential in ICT integration supports student-centred instruction.

Across the studies, professional learning structures, collaborative inquiry, ICT-mediated mentoring, and leadership-supported teacher autonomy function as key mediating pathways. Where teacher readiness and capacity-building structures were weak, curriculum reforms promoting student-centred learning showed limited classroom impact. These findings confirm that teacher capacity development is not peripheral but foundational to the enactment of student-centred leadership.

Across all five themes, leadership influence on student outcomes was predominantly indirect and mediated through teacher competence, instructional quality, relational trust, ethical climate, and technological enablement. Student-centred leadership in Southeast Asia therefore does not manifest as a discrete leadership typology but as an integrated configuration of practices embedded within institutional, cultural, and policy contexts. The synthesis reconceptualises student-centred leadership as a multidimensional practice constellation that positions student engagement, agency, wellbeing, and learning as central referents while recognising the mediating role of teachers, school climate, and systemic alignment.

## DISCUSSION

This systematic review reconceptualises student-centred leadership in Southeast Asian schools by synthesising evidence from 32 empirical studies and examining the practices, mediating mechanisms, and student outcomes associated with this leadership orientation. The findings demonstrate that student-centred

leadership in the region does not operate as a unified or standalone leadership model. Instead, it is enacted as a constellation of interrelated practices that span instructional leadership, relational governance, ethical climate formation, pedagogical innovation, and teacher professional development. By integrating these dimensions, the review advances the field beyond leadership typologies and towards a practice-oriented and mechanism-based understanding of how leadership influences student engagement, wellbeing, agency, and learning outcomes within diverse sociocultural and policy contexts.

Consistent with Hallinger (2011), the review confirms that leadership effects on student learning are predominantly indirect. Leithwood et al. (2020) similarly demonstrate that principals influence student outcomes primarily through shaping teaching quality, professional learning, and school climate rather than through direct interaction with students. The empirical evidence from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and China reinforces this mediated pathway. Leadership practices oriented towards instructional coherence and learning improvement create enabling conditions for teachers to enact student-centred pedagogies, which subsequently enhance engagement, wellbeing, and academic achievement. Robinson et al. (2008) argue that leadership focused explicitly on teaching and learning yields stronger student outcomes than leadership enacted in managerial or compliance-oriented forms. In centralised and policy-driven education systems, Hallinger and Heck (2010) describe this dynamic as guided professionalism, in which school leaders interpret and align national reform agendas with local school contexts. This interpretation is particularly relevant in Southeast Asia, where reforms such as Merdeka Belajar, Education 4.0, and Thailand 4.0 require principals to translate policy aspirations into pedagogical enactment. Rislan et al. (2025) describe this process as instructional stewardship, highlighting the strategic role of school leaders in contextualising reform.

The review also deepens theoretical debates concerning student voice and agency. Although policy discourse increasingly promotes student participation, Fielding (2011) cautions that student voice initiatives risk becoming symbolic unless accompanied by structural and cultural transformation. Cook-Sather (2024) similarly contends that authentic student involvement requires a redistribution of power rather than superficial inclusion mechanisms. The studies synthesised in this review confirm that relational trust and shared purpose are central mediating conditions for meaningful student agency. Bryk (2002) identifies trust as foundational to school improvement processes, while Spillane and Mertz (2015) conceptualise leadership as interaction rather than authority. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) further emphasise relational traits such as empathy, communicative openness, and supportive interaction as critical to engagement. In hierarchical schooling contexts common across Southeast Asia, student-centred leadership therefore requires deliberate cultural recalibration to legitimise student participation and reduce symbolic compliance.

Student wellbeing, ethical school climate, and inclusive disciplinary practices also emerge as central components of student-centred leadership. OECD (2019) underscores that ethically grounded leadership contributes not only to academic achievement but also to emotional and psychosocial development. Carney (2022) similarly highlights leadership responsibility for fostering psychological safety and



equitable school climates. Vesudevan et al. (2025) argue that sustainable and ethically oriented leadership in Malaysian contexts strengthens alignment between student-centred practices and broader SDG-oriented educational agendas. The review findings demonstrate that leadership influence on student wellbeing is frequently mediated through teachers. Day and Gu (2013) describe teacher wellbeing as a conduit linking leadership to classroom climate, while Leithwood et al. (2020) associate empathetic and transformational leadership with reduced burnout and more supportive learning environments. Conversely, Morrison and Vaandering (2012) warn that punitive disciplinary practices undermine relational trust and contradict restorative and student-centred values. The persistence of such practices in certain contexts reflects a policy–practice gap and reinforces the need for leadership that models ethical, inclusive, and restorative approaches.

The evidence further indicates that student-centred leadership is closely linked to curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation. Hallinger (2011) conceptualises learning-centred leadership as the removal of barriers to instructional change rather than the imposition of prescriptive pedagogies. Robinson (2018) emphasises the leader’s role in articulating reform visions and mobilising both financial and non-financial resources to support innovation. Across Southeast Asian contexts, leadership has enabled project-based learning, gamification, mobile learning, metaverse-based instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, and competency-based curricula to enhance motivation, engagement, and learner autonomy. However, Darling-Hammond (2017) cautions that pedagogical innovation without sufficient teacher readiness or systemic support is unlikely to produce sustainable change. The synthesis confirms that digital and curricular reforms generate meaningful student outcomes only when embedded within coherent professional learning systems and aligned leadership support.

Teacher professional development emerges as the most consistent mediating mechanism across themes. Leadership-supported lesson study, professional learning communities, ICT-mediated reflection, and collaborative inquiry strengthen teachers’ pedagogical capacity and instructional confidence. Nadeem (2024) frames distributed leadership as a strategy for enhancing professional capital and positioning teachers as drivers of change. Glickman (2002) reiterates that leadership support must extend beyond formal training to include time allocation, emotional encouragement, and recognition of teacher expertise. In reform-intensive Southeast Asian systems characterised by uneven teacher preparedness, sustainable student-centred leadership depends on systematically aligned and contextually responsive professional development infrastructures.

This study makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualises student-centred leadership as a multidimensional and mediated configuration of practices rather than a discrete leadership typology. By integrating instructional, relational, ethical, innovative, and professional development dimensions, the review advances a practice-based framework that foregrounds enactment rather than labels. Second, it explicitly identifies mediating mechanisms such as teacher capacity, relational trust, ethical climate, and curriculum alignment as explanatory pathways linking leadership to student outcomes. This mechanism-oriented perspective extends prior leadership research that has often reported associations without specifying processes. Third, by grounding the synthesis in

Southeast Asian contexts, the study contributes to decentring Western-dominated leadership theory and strengthens the development of contextually sensitive conceptualisations of leadership practice.

The findings carry significant implications for leadership practice and policy in Southeast Asia. At the school level, principals are encouraged to prioritise instructional alignment, relational trust-building, and sustained professional learning. Leadership development programmes should incorporate competencies related to ethical decision-making, empathy, culturally responsive communication, and instructional stewardship. Given hierarchical traditions in several Southeast Asian contexts, deliberate efforts are required to institutionalise participatory structures that move beyond symbolic student voice.

At the policy level, stronger alignment is needed between national reform agendas and leadership preparation systems. Initiatives such as Merdeka Belajar, Education 4.0, and SDG 4 emphasise autonomy, inclusivity, and holistic development; however, these goals are unlikely to be realised without leadership autonomy, targeted preparation, and sustained systemic support. Policymakers may therefore reconsider accountability frameworks that rely narrowly on performance metrics and instead incorporate indicators that recognise instructional leadership, climate-building, teacher development, and student wellbeing.

The findings also highlight the importance of equity-conscious leadership amid rapid digital expansion. Technology-enhanced learning can expand student autonomy and engagement, yet disparities in access remain pronounced in rural and under-resourced schools. Leadership and policy responses must therefore address digital inequality by ensuring infrastructure support, teacher training, and equitable distribution of resources. Without such interventions, innovation risks reproducing structural inequities.

Despite expanding scholarship, several gaps remain. Methodologically, greater use of longitudinal, quasi-experimental, and mixed-method designs is needed to examine sustained leadership effects and causal pathways. Students remain underrepresented as primary participants, and future research should incorporate participatory and youth-informed methodologies to deepen understanding of agency and voice. Conceptually, clearer distinction is required between leadership labels and enacted practices. Micro-level studies examining decision-making processes and interactional dynamics would enhance theoretical precision. Geographically, comparative research across underrepresented Southeast Asian countries would strengthen contextual sensitivity. Finally, further investigation into the intersection of leadership, equity, and structural marginalisation is necessary to ensure that student-centred leadership meaningfully addresses issues related to disability, socio-economic inequality, gender, and ethnicity.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic review reconceptualised student-centred leadership in Southeast Asian schools by synthesising 32 empirical studies published between 2010 and 2025. The main findings of this study indicate that student-centred leadership exerts a stronger and more structurally mediated influence on student

engagement, wellbeing, agency, and learning outcomes than previously assumed. Rather than functioning as a discrete leadership model, student-centred leadership operates as a multidimensional constellation of practices embedded in instructional alignment, relational trust-building, ethical climate formation, pedagogical innovation, and sustained teacher professional development. The findings challenge earlier assumptions that leadership effects can be adequately explained through singular typologies such as instructional or transformational leadership. Instead, the evidence demonstrates that leadership influence is predominantly indirect and operates through identifiable mediating mechanisms, particularly teacher capacity, school climate, relational culture, and curriculum enactment. This reframing opens new avenues for understanding leadership not as a positional authority but as a coordinated configuration of practices that position students as central referents in school improvement.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this study advances the literature in three important ways. First, it reinforces prior research, including Hallinger (2011) and Leithwood et al. (2020), by confirming that leadership impact on students is largely mediated rather than direct. Second, it questions the adequacy of leadership typologies that overlook contextual enactment and relational dynamics, thereby challenging narrow interpretations of instructional or compliance-oriented leadership models. Third, it introduces a more integrated and mechanism-based conceptualisation of student-centred leadership grounded in Southeast Asian contexts. By foregrounding mediating pathways such as professional learning structures, ethical governance, relational trust, and technological enablement, this study enriches theoretical discussions and contributes to decentring Western-dominated leadership frameworks. The review therefore strengthens both conceptual clarity and contextual sensitivity in the field of educational leadership.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The synthesis was limited to 32 empirical studies identified through Scopus and Web of Science databases and restricted to English-language publications between 2010 and 2025. Although systematic procedures were employed, the relatively small number of eligible studies and the uneven geographical distribution across Southeast Asia limit the generalisability of the findings. In addition, many of the included studies relied on cross-sectional or qualitative designs, which constrain causal inference. Future research should employ longitudinal, quasi-experimental, and mixed-method approaches to examine the sustainability and causal pathways of student-centred leadership practices. Greater inclusion of student perspectives as primary research participants is also recommended in order to deepen understanding of agency and voice. Comparative and cross-national studies within underrepresented Southeast Asian countries would further strengthen contextual generalisability.

Overall, this review demonstrates that student-centred leadership in Southeast Asia is adaptive, relational, and mediated through teacher capacity and school climate rather than enacted as a singular leadership model. Effective student-centred leadership is characterised by deliberate instructional focus, ethical and inclusive governance, relational trust, curriculum responsiveness, and sustained professional development. Strengthening these interconnected dimensions through coherent policy alignment, leadership preparation, and equity-oriented reform

remains essential for advancing inclusive, high-quality, and student-responsive education across the region.

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