Leading sustainable school improvement: a meta-synthesis of qualitative research on problems and challenges faced by school leaders

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Introduction: Developing broader insights into the problems or challenges faced by school leaders resulting from various factors both within and out of school is a crucial attempt to provide solutions on scientific grounds and to ensure the sustainability of schools.

Methods: This study aims to contribute to both the theory and practice of sustainable school administration through conducting the meta-synthesis of prior qualitative studies on the problems and challenges faced by school leaders. Data were collected from several databases indexing educational research, and the analysis was conducted using data from 24 studies presenting the perspectives of a total of 614 participants.

Results: The results showed that school leaders had significant problems particularly with insufficient funds and budgets, shortage of school staff, insufficient or unwilling teachers, an abundance of responsibilities with limited authority, maintenance of school buildings, and tackling excessive and fast-changing legislations. Lack of inspectors' expertise and their being closed to novel ideas, principal assignments not based on merit, insufficient communication and collaboration among teachers, and pressures from the superiors or unions were also listed among the other serious problems and challenges.

Discussion: These findings suggest putting more effort into improving human resources, school budgets, curriculum and instruction, parental involvement, mechanisms to tackle student problematic behavior, ensuring the professional quality of teachers, school leaders, and inspectors as well as providing school leaders with the necessary support while expecting them to realize an abundance of responsibilities. The challenges caused by bureaucratic pressures, political press, and union discord should also be crucially considered by the higher authorities if school leaders are expected to contribute to the sustainable improvement of schools.

1 Introduction

As rapid advances in science and technology continue to affect human life in the 21st century significantly, countries are feeling the pressure to take significant new steps in every field to catch up with the changing demands and needs as well as to strengthen their positions and to achieve prosperity in this new world (Karakose et al., 2024a, 2024b; Peng, 2022). Enhancing the quality and competency of their citizens has an important share in the development of societies. Therefore, providing quality education to their citizens has become even more significant for the countries to sustain their improvement in the face of these rapid changes (Ilomäki and Lakkala, 2018).

Building and sustaining high-quality education systems has become significant more than ever before so as to enable the constant improvement of nations in every respect, which assumes greater responsibility to the actors in the education systems to train qualified manpower and citizens that can support the improvement of their society (Avolio and Kahai, 2003; Karakose and Tülübas, 2024; Papadakis et al., 2024). Schools lie at the heart of educational systems as the success of an education system largely depends on the success of schools. Schools' fulfillment of these functions requires effective management and administration, which makes school leaders one of the important actors in facilitating the effectiveness of an education system (Akbaba and Erdoğan, 2014; Gümüş et al., 2024; Leithwood et al., 2004; Pashiardis and Kafa, 2022).

School leaders enact numerous challenging tasks from decision-making, planning, and organizing to coordination, communication, ordering, coordinating, controlling, and monitoring to enable the better functioning of schools (Aydın, 2019; Hallinger, 2005; Gurr et al., 2022). They are equally responsible for the efficient use of both physical and human resources in pursuit of school goals (Usta and Boğa, 2021). While enacting these numerous administrative tasks which are critical to the success of schools and education systems, they often encounter many problems and challenges, and their success in administration largely depends on their ability to tackle these challenges and utilize effective solutions (Büte and Balcı, 2010; Hallinger, 2005). Therefore, it is of great importance to identify and solve these problems encountered in school administration so that schools can achieve their goals in the best way possible (Büte and Balcı, 2010).

The problems and challenges faced by the school leaders have thus garnered significant research interest with the purpose of identifying the sources and possible solutions to these problems and challenges on a scientific ground. Most of these investigations have been designed in qualitative research methodologies so as to develop an indebt understanding into these problems and challenges, and they have contributed significantly to this line of research (Ağalday and Gül, 2022; Aslanargun and Bozkurt, 2012; Bozkurt et al., 2018; Can, 2022; Çatal et al., 2023; Cereci and Çetin, 2019; Çevik, 2019; Duygulu et al., 2023; Hoşgörür and Arslan, 2014; Kazak and Evirgen, 2024; Şatır et al., 2024). However, a synthesis of these previous findings, which mostly focus on a few aspects of school administration, could help gain a more global and comprehensive understanding into these challenges and problems and contribute to the sustainability of school effectiveness.

The review of the literature yielded numerous studies that focused on the problems and challenges of school leaders in a variety of school and country contexts. However, to our knowledge, the literature lacks a synthesis of results from these studies. The current study aims to contribute to this gap in the literature by utilizing the meta-synthesis of

their findings to delineate a more holistic picture of these problems and challenges. Through synthesizing the problems and challenges of Turkish school principals as identified by prior research, the current study is likely to yield useful findings that could guide the decisions and attempts to cope with the frequently encountered challenges and problems during school administration and to sustain the improvement of schools.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Research model

The current study aimed to synthesize qualitative findings on the problems and challenges encountered by school leaders, and thus adopted a meta-synthesis methodology that best fits this purpose. A meta-analysis is conducted using the findings of prior qualitative research with the purpose of providing aggregated knowledge and deeper insights into the significant elements of a phenomenon (Glesne, 2013; Johnson et al., 2020; Tülübaş and Göktürk, 2023). Very similar to qualitative content analysis, a meta-synthesis also starts with coding the key concepts from the studies selected for the analysis, which could be done at emic or etic bases. Accordingly, during coding, the researcher can either take the identical words/phrases as codes or express common ideas using their own words/expressions (Britten et al., 2002). Using these codes and opinions, the researcher conducts a secondary analysis of the findings from studies in order to present more comprehensive and deeper insights into the phenomenon, which usually goes beyond the content of original findings from the selected studies (Lachal et al., 2017; Sandelowski and Barroso, 2003). By integrating various perspectives and experiences from an accumulated number of participants, metasynthesis studies are considered to yield more substantive and tentatively more generalizable results, which could offer a scientific ground for both the policy and practice (Finfgeld, 2003; Leary and Walker, 2018).

2.2 Data collection

Data search for the studies to be included in the analysis was conducted on various databases such as Google Scholar, ULAKBİM, YÖKTEZ, and Dergipark, all of which index a large variety of research from different educational contexts. We reported the whole process of data search and extraction following the PRISMA 2020 guideline (Page et al., 2021), and reported the process in the flow chart in Figure 1.

We conducted the search on 21 February 2024 using the keywords which we identified from the relevant literature concerning the problems and challenges facing school leaders. The keywords utilized were "school management problems," "school administration problems," "school leadership problems," "education leadership problems," "education management problems," "administrative problems," "school problems," "education system problems," "school management challenges," "school administration challenges," "education management challenges," "administrative challenges," "school challenges," "education system challenges".

For the selection of studies to be included in the analysis, we used the inclusion/exclusion criteria in Table 1.

Two independent reviewers evaluated the studies yielded by data search for their eligibility according to the inclusion/exclusion criteria,
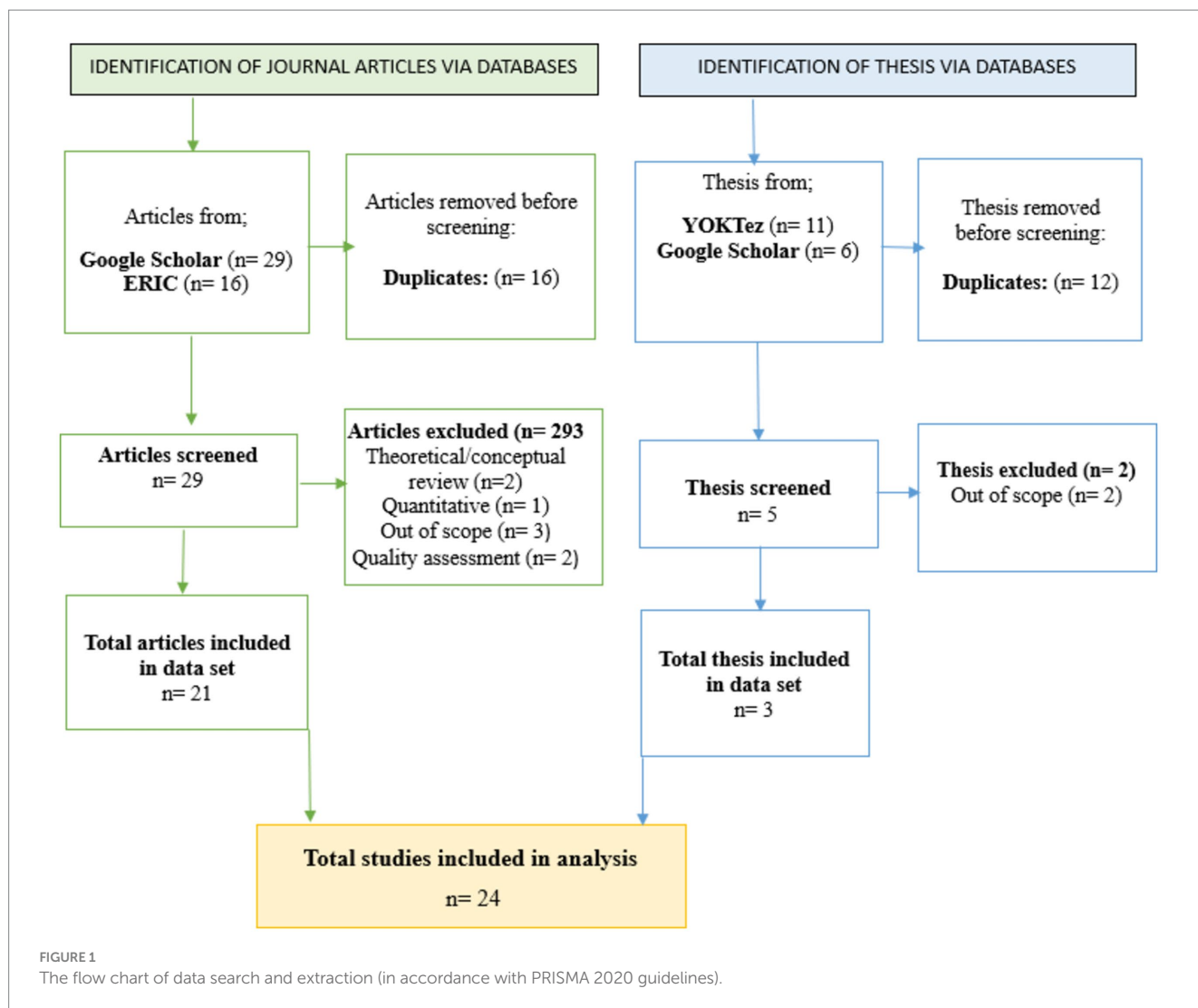
FIGURE 1
The flow chart of data search and extraction (in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines).

TABLE 1 Inclusion/exclusion criteria.

	Include	Exclude
Research field	Educational management, educational administration, educational leadership, education	Non-educational (e. g. medicine)
Study type	Qualitative studies Articles; thesis	Quantitative studies, conceptual/theoretical papers, reviews Conference proceedings; book chapters
Key topics	Problems and challenges faced by school leaders	Problems and challenges faced by other school communities (e. g. teachers, middle managers, superiors)
Temporal scope	No specification	No specification

and for their methodological quality according to the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research. According to this checklist, rigorous qualitative studies (1) establish clear research question(s); (2) select an appropriate qualitative design congruent with the research question, (3) define the methodology and data analysis in adequate detail, (4) interpret the qualitative data regarding the qualities of its cultural context or the relevant theoretical background, (4) inform readers about the positionality of the analyst, (5) gives sufficient accounts of the participants' views and voices, (6) receives ethical approval from the participants or an appropriate body, (7) report and interpret findings with a final account of conclusion and implications.

After their initial, independent review of studies, two reviewers also had a discussion section and prepared an agreed list of studies to be included in the meta-synthesis. In case of any disagreement, reviewers consulted the other authors of the manuscript before making a final decision. Studies which totally fit the inclusion/exclusion criteria, and which got a positive score in 90% of the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research were included in the final dataset.

At the end of the data selection process, 24 studies were left to be included in the current meta-synthesis. These studies are listed in the references section, and marked with an (*). Detailed information about these studies is also given in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Details about the studies included in the meta-synthesis.

Code	Author(s), year	Participants	School level	Publication type
A1	Ada et al. (2014)	19 teachers	Preschool	Article
A2	Ağalday and Gül (2022)	15 principals	Preschool/Primary	Article
A3	Akyürek (2020)	56 teachers	Preschool	Article
A4	Aslanargun and Bozkurt (2012)	7 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A5	Bozkurt et al. (2018)	13 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A6	Bozkurt et al. (2023)	15 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A7	Büte and Balcı (2010)	6 principals	Preschool	Article
A8	Can (2022)	36 principals	Preschool/Primary/ Secondary	Article
A9	Çatal et al. (2023)	12 principals	Secondary	Article
A10	Çetin (2019)	22 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A11	Çevik (2019)	12 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A12	Döş and Sağır (2013)	13 inspectors	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A13	Özkan et al. (2023)	42 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A14	Şatır et al. (2024)	30 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A15	Usta and Boğa (2021)	21 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A16	Üysal et al. (2023)	34 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A17	Yıldız (2018)	13 principals	Preschool	Article
A18	Hoşgörür and Arslan (2014)	15 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A19	Cereci and Çetin (2019)	15 principals	Primary/Secondary	Article
A20	Duygulu et al. (2023)	116 principals	Preschool/Primary/Secondary	Article
A21	Kazak and Evirgen (2024)	15 principals	Primary	Article
T1	Bıyık (2014)	10 principals	Primary	Thesis
T2	Meşe (2009)	30 principals	Primary	Thesis
T3	Kayıkçı (2014)	47 principals	Primary	Thesis

As shown in Table 2, our meta-synthesis included data from 21 articles and 3 theses, collected with the participation of 526 school principals, 75 teachers, and 13 inspectors in total. Among these studies, three were conducted in a preschool context, 7 in a primary school context, 1 in a mix of preschool and primary school context, and 13 in a mix of preschool, primary school, and secondary school context. Regarding the distribution of studies by year of publication, 5 were published in 2023, 4 in 2014, 3 in 2019, 2 in the years 2018, 2022, 2024, and 1 in the years 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2019, 2020, and 2021.

2.3 Data analysis

We conducted the analysis by using the thematic synthesis method, which is defined as an analysis process in which the findings of qualitative research are coded, and later sub-themes and themes are created using these codes (Thomas and Harden, 2008). Accordingly, the analysis started with the line reading of the results section of the studies included, and continued with hand-coding. Next, two experts who conducted numerous qualitative studies in the field of educational sciences were asked to code the studies, and the list of codes obtained by the researcher and the experts were compared to form a final list of codes. To ensure reliability in coding, Miles and Huberman's (1994) "coding reliability [reliability = number of overlapping codes/(number of overlapping codes + number of non-overlapping codes)]" formula

was utilized, which indicated that an 80% of agreement between the coders is an acceptable level of agreement in qualitative coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994). According to this formula, in the current analysis, the coders reached 95% agreement over which codes should be selected to form the categories and subthemes. By categorizing the codes, 12 sub-themes were formed under the theme of 'problems and challenges of school leaders' (Table 3).

As presented in Table 3, the 12 sub-themes yielded by thematic synthesis were problems and challenges regarding human resources, school budgeting, curriculum and instruction, parents, students, teachers, principals, roles/responsibilities, inspection, legislations/regulations, school building, and school environment.

2.3.1 Credibility
As underlined by Patton (2014), the following steps must be carefully taken to ensure the credibility of a quantitative meta-synthesis:

- Identifying and expressing the purpose of the study clearly
- Determining criteria for selecting studies to be included in meta-synthesis
- Presenting detailed information about the studies included in the analysis
- Providing information regarding the expertise of the coders and the level of agreement between coders

TABLE 3 Themes and sub-themes emerged from the analysis.

Theme	Sub-theme
Problems/challenges facing school leaders	Human resources
	School budgeting
	Curriculum and instruction
	Parents
	Students
	Teachers
	Principals
	Roles and responsibilities
	Inspection
	Legislations/regulations
	School building
	School environment

In the current study, we have taken these steps very carefully. To ensure reliability in coding, the coding process was carried out with the participation of two experts who have conducted numerous qualitative research in the field of educational sciences. During this stage, Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula, e.g., "coding reliability [reliability = number of overlapping codes/(number of overlapping codes + number of non-overlapping codes)]" was used to ensure the reliability of the coding, which indicated a 90% of agreement in the current study. In addition, while elaborating on the sub-themes, we included quotations from the studies to support the credibility of the results.

3 Results

This section elaborates on the results obtained from the meta-synthesis of prior findings regarding the problems and challenges of school administration.

3.1 Problems and challenges facing school principals

Relevant codes and sub-themes of the 'problems and challenges of school leaders' theme are presented in Table 4, and the findings are expressed in detail with the support of quotes taken from the primary studies.

As presented in Table 4, problems and challenges faced by school leaders are categorized under 12 subthemes. Accordingly, school leaders encounter problems or challenges regarding human resources, school budgeting, curriculum and instruction, parents, students, teachers, school leaders, roles and responsibilities, inspection, legislation/regulations, and school building.

3.1.1 Problems and challenges related to human resources

The synthesis of studies yielded that school leaders often face problems and challenges related to human resources such as the shortage of personnel, the lack of qualifications of the existing

personnel, low performance, the employment of temporary personnel, the high number of relocations, the abundance of disabled personnel, neglect and disruption of duty, communication problems, and undisciplined behaviors. The following expressions by some of the participants exemplify some of these problems:

> *Keeping school clean is a very important problem; there are a total of 210 people in my school, and there are no single personnel in charge of cleaning. The classrooms need to be cleaned during each break. Employing cleaning staff brings extra financial burden. You want to equip classrooms with new technologies, but there is a lack of funds. School principals do not have any plans regarding education. All we are doing is drudgery. We are constantly having meetings, but they are not effective at all. (A4)*

> *The need for civil servants, housekeepers, and permanent teachers is one of the most important problems in our schools. (A8)*

3.1.2 Problems and challenges related to school budgeting

It is stated in prior studies that the problems encountered in school administration were also related to school budgeting. Participants stressed that the school budget was inadequate, not enough to afford high expenses and provide necessary funds. Some sample expressions from the participants are as follows:

> *Lack of resources and financial difficulties are the most important problems in education and school administration. (A8)*

> *Most schools have significant financial difficulties. So to speak, most schools are 'living off their own humps'. For this reason, school principals cannot fulfill their primary duty of supporting education. I think the Ministry is unable to send sufficient funds to all schools. (A11)*

3.1.3 Problems and challenges related to curriculum and instruction

Another source of problems or challenges facing school leaders was related to curriculum and instruction. Among these problems, participants listed crowded classes, lack of course equipment, constant change in the curriculum, high-density curriculum, inadequacy of the curriculum, exam-oriented system, constant systemic changes, and dual education as problems most frequently faced by school leaders. The following excerpts from the participants' expressions exemplify the case well:

> *Lack of short-, medium--, and long-term planning in education and, as underlined by the Minister, frequent changes in the education system are among the most important problems. In addition, the high density of the curriculum, it's changing too frequently, not involving educators in the decision-making, and efforts to improve the systems with ideas borrowed from other countries, mostly incompatible with the requirements of our system and social structure, constantly multiply the problems we face. (A8)*

> *Our education system is so exam-oriented that it conflicts with the true goals of schooling such as learning to learn or discovery of*

TABLE 4 Themes, subthemes, and codes regarding the problems/challenges of school administration.

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Problems/ challenges facing school leaders	Human resources	Personnel shortages, personnel incompetence, low performance, employment of temporary personnel, high turnover, a high number of disabled personnel, neglect and disruption of duty, communication problems, undisciplined behavior
	School budget	Lack of school budget, insufficient funding support, high expenses
	Curriculum and instruction	Crowded classrooms, lack of course equipment, constant curricular changes, high-density curriculum, inadequate curriculum, exam-oriented system, constant systemic changes, dual education
	Parents	Parental indifference, lack of parental participation, parent pressure, unrealistic expectations, conflicting parental expectations, insufficient cooperation, low parent awareness, excessive faith in their children, unfounded complaints, accusatory attitude, lack of support, lack of school-parent collaboration
	Students	Lack of personal goals, high absenteeism, indifference, low motivation, undisciplined behavior, low success, wrong school choice, peer bullying, the prevalence of violence, misuse of mobile phones, damaging school furniture, negative relationships between students
	Teachers	Neglect of duty, lack of communication, resistance to change, insufficient knowledge of legislation, low awareness of duty, professional inadequacy, disruption in shifts, low performance, distrust of management, lack of contribution to school management, excessive competition between teachers, grouping, jealousy, burnout, lack of cooperation, frequent sick leaving, lack of communication skills, negative relationship with parents, insufficient professional development, curriculum dislike, working at the same school for too long
	School leaders	Short-term assignment, selection of principals, insufficient support for school leaders, problems, fear of being reported, lack of merit, limited career and professional development, adopting traditional management approach, non-educational chores, inconsistency among school leaders
	Roles and responsibilities	Non-educational chores, additional duties, inability to make independent decisions, unrealistic expectations from school, excessive workload, excessive responsibility, limited authority
	Inspection	Non-specialist inspectors, insufficient professional development, inadequate guidance from inspectors
	Legislations	Constant change, excessive legislation, excessive bureaucracy, non-compliance with legislation
	School building	Need for constant maintenance and repair, lack of space, old school buildings, lack of heating, lack of fixtures, inefficient use of fixtures, too large buildings
	School environment	Bureaucratic pressure, political press, union repression/discord

personal capabilities. Due to this contradiction, most students fail to attain these goals. (A22)

3.1.4 Problems and challenges related to parents

Parents are also noted as the source of some problems faced by school leaders. Accordingly, participants stated that parental indifference, lack of participation in meetings, attempts to put pressure on teachers/leaders, unrealistic expectations, conflict of expectations with school goals, insufficient cooperation, low parent awareness, excessive confidence in their children, unfounded complaints, accusatory attitude, lack of support for the school were among the most frequent problems created by parents. The following expressions by some of the participants exemplify these iterations well:

Communicating with parents, especially those with low education levels, gets too difficult sometimes. There are many parents who act pedantic and interfere with our work even though they do not know anything about teaching and learning. Most of our time is spent convincing such parents. (A11)

Unfounded complaints are another problem that bothers school principals. Parents frequently send complaints about principals or other school staff, sometimes named and sometimes anonymously, both via email and petition. Most of the complaints turn out to

be unfounded, and in some complaints, the case is explained in a distorted way. Higher authorities take all complaints into consideration and immediately initiate an investigation against the relevant school principals. Such complaints make us uneasy, damage our enthusiasm, and desire for taking initiative, and thus affect our performance negatively. (A10)

The attitudes of some parents can be a problem. In particular, some parents may experience conflicts with other parents or teachers. Coping with these conflicts is really challenging at times. (A9)

3.1.5 Problems and challenges related to students

School leaders are also found to face significant problems and challenges resulting from students' lack of personal goals, excessive absenteeism, apathy, low motivation, undisciplined behavior, low success, wrong school choice, peer bullying, the prevalence of violence, excessive phone use in classes, damaging school furniture and stuff, and negative relationships with each other. Some sample expressions by the participants regarding the student-related problems are as follows:

Some of our students constantly damage classroom and school equipment. They do not take ownership of classroom and school equipment. Sometimes we have sink taps and classroom doors repaired every other day. (A11)

We encounter disciplinary and behavioral problems in our school. Rule violations and inappropriate behavior among students are becoming common. (A9)

Students' lack of interest in lessons, non-compliance with school rules, negative attitudes and behaviors, and low achievement levels of can be listed as important problems. (A8)

3.1.6 Problems and challenges related to teachers

School leaders were also found to have problems related to teachers, which could be quite challenging for them. As listed by various participants, problems related to teachers included neglect of duty, lack of communication, resistance to change, insufficient knowledge of legislation, low awareness of duty, professional inadequacy, disruption in shifts, low performance, distrust of management, lack of contribution to school management, excessive competition among teachers, and grouping. They expressed jealousy, professional burnout, lack of cooperation, constantly taking sick leaves, lack of communication skills, negative parent relations, not seeking professional development, not liking the curriculum and working at the same school for a long time as other problems that may face school leaders. The following excerpts from the participants offer some ground for this sub-theme:

We especially face problems related to some teachers' low performance in some of their duties such as shifts, starting/leaving class on time, meeting document submission deadlines, and enacting their responsibilities towards students' learning. (A4)

There is a lack of communication between teachers and we experience difficulties in collaborating with teachers. (A9)

3.1.7 Problems and challenges related to school leaders

Among the problems related to school leaders, are shortness of their tenure, assignment of principals, receiving insufficient support in case of problems, fear of being complained, lack of merit, limitation of professional development, adopting traditional management approaches, being too occupied with non-educational chores stood out and expressed the incompatibility between managers. Some of these are exemplified by the following expressions of some participants:

The current school principal assignment system is ideological, not merit-based. This was the case in the past and it is the same now. (A8)

One of the main problems encountered in school administration is the appointment of incompetent people as principals. Appointing teachers who cannot manage their classrooms properly as principals causes significant problems. Additionally, I think that principals who have reached their retirement age and are no longer enthusiastic create problems in school management. (A8)

3.1.8 Problems and challenges related to administrative roles and responsibilities

Participants expressed non-educational chores, additional duties, inability to make independent decisions, unrealistic expectations from the school, excessive workload, excessive responsibility and limited

authority as problems related to duties and authority encountered in school management. Some of these problems are stated in the following excerpts from participants:

Lack of authority despite an abundance of responsibilities is another major problem we face. These problems are so challenging that they render us incapable of finding a solution. The school principal cannot select their assistant principal, teachers or even assistant staff to work with, and does not have any sanction over those who have inefficient performance or even cannot lay problematic staff off. This not only damages the reputation of our office but also negatively affects our productivity as principals. (A10)

As school principals, we 'carry the drum and someone else beats the gavel' so to say. Leaving the entire workload to a principal and expecting him to think clearly under this workload is unrealistic. There are a lot of responsibilities of a principal but with little authority. (A8)

3.1.9 Problems and challenges related to inspection

Prior research indicates that some problems facing school principals could also result from inspectors such as their lack of expertise in supervision, unwillingness to pursue professional development and inadequacy of adopting novel perspectives, and insufficient guidance in case of problems. From this perspective, some inspectors are likely to be the cause of school leaders' problems rather than offering solutions or support for challenging situations.

3.1.10 Problems and challenges related to legislation/regulations

In relation to legislation/regulations, studies revealed that constant changes in legislation, promoting excessive legislative rules that could significantly limit the agency of school leaders, excessive focus on bureaucracy, and cases enforcing to act against the legislation were among the significant problems faced by school leaders. These problems and challenges are exemplified by the following expressions from some participants:

As a school principal, we are having trouble with regulatory issues. The Ministry should try to ease the bureaucracy if they are to support us. (A15)

Another important problem is that we are faced with too many legislative provisions. (A8)

Poor communication between principals, decisions being against the legislation or actions being taken too late due to the heavy burden of bureaucracy. (A6)

3.1.11 Problems and challenges related to school buildings

Problems resulting from the school buildings were also listed among the significant challenges faced by the school leaders. Major problems related to school buildings were expressed as the constant need for maintenance, the lack of proper heating, the lack of fixtures, ineffective use of fixtures and the large size of the building. Some

sample expressions by the participants regarding the school buildings are presented as follows:

> *Our school building is very old, and it is physically inadequate in every respect. There are constant malfunctions in electricity, water and heating systems. Every year, we carry out painting and repair works within our means, despite all kinds of difficulties. However, since the building is old, what we do is of no use.* (A11)

> *The facilities in our school are really insufficient; the school garden is small, playgrounds are few, and there are no areas for social activities and sports. Yet, we implement dual education in this school.* (A10)

3.1.12 Problems and challenges related to the school environment

Participants in the prior studies stated bureaucratic pressures, political influence and union repression/discord as problems caused by the school environment. Some participants exemplified these problems well in their following expressions:

> *The main problem we face is the interference of politics in school administration, pressure from superiors, constant changes in the National Education System, and lack of continuity in education policies pose problems.* (A8)

> *Interventions pursuing political and ideological interests disrupt our work. This leads to favoritism among staff. Appointments that are not made according to merit and expertise can significantly block the system. Moreover, people who are assigned to some positions by the reference of some superiors feel bound by their interests and prefer to act accordingly rather than pursuing educational goals.* (A11)

4 Discussion

This study conducted a meta-synthesis of results provided by articles and theses published and indexed in reputable scientific indexes between the years 2009–2024. The synthesis of the findings from these studies indicated that school leaders encounter a variety of problems and challenges while performing their roles. These problems were found to be particularly related to human resources, school budgeting, curriculum and instruction, parents, students, teachers, school leaders, roles and responsibilities of the school principal, inspectors, legislations, school buildings, and school environment.

Many of the studies included in the meta-synthesis revealed that there were various problems related to human resources in school management. The importance of the human resources element in organizations of different sizes and diverse purposes is now widely accepted (Kandemir and Argon, 2020). Understanding the significant role of human resources in the success and sustainability of organizations has garnered increased interest in supporting employee well-being and performance (Yıldırım and Bakır, 2014). According to our results, the most significant problems related to human resources encountered in schools were identified as shortage of service or teaching personnel, limited qualifications of the existing personnel, low performance, employment of temporary personnel, high displacement, neglect and

disruption of duty, communication problems and undisciplined behaviors. According to Aslan's (2021) research results, one of the main problems experienced in schools was the lack or quality of personnel. Koşar et al. (2013) underline that a sufficient number of support personnel should be assigned to schools to sustain school effectiveness. Similarly, Aküzüm (2017) states that temporary staff employment and staff shortage negatively affect the success and planning efforts at school. Indeed, as underlined by Bursalıoğlu (2011), school personnel other than teachers are also very significant in the attainment of educational goals since they have indirect positive or negative effects on the improvement of the school's daily activities. The extent to which the school leader can build the physical and human resources of the school is a determining factor in school effectiveness (Gurr et al., 2022). Therefore, the selection and assignment of staff sufficient in number and quality is of great importance to sustaining the performance of the school.

Another important problem encountered by school leaders was related to the insufficient funding of schools and challenges in school budgeting. Insufficient school budget will inevitably have negative effects on school performance and may cause a decrease in the success of students. Therefore, managing the budget-related problems is important. For this reason, sufficient resources must be allocated to schools to ensure high-quality education (Hoşgörür and Arslan, 2014). In fact, participants from several of the studies stressed that their school did not even have a budget of its own, no external funding was provided, and affording the high expenses without any financial support was really challenging. As stated by Kayıkçı and Akan (2014), funding problems encountered in schools lead teachers and principals to look for different alternatives, which reduces the productivity of teachers and principals. Similarly, Babaoğlan's (2007) study revealed that budget inadequacy was one of the most significant problems faced by school leaders during the school management processes. The results of several other studies (Gümüşeli, 2009; Özer et al., 2015; Şahin, 1996; Turan et al., 2012) showed that schools faced significant problems related to lack of financial resources, which lend support to the findings of the current study.

Our study also revealed that school leaders face several curriculum and instruction-related problems, two significant means of achieving educational goals and maintaining the existence of schools (Taymaz, 2000). In particular, crowded classes, lack of course equipment, constant change in the curriculum, high-density curriculum, inadequacy of the curriculum, exam-oriented system, continuous systemic changes and dual education were identified as significant problems encountered by school leaders. Prior studies also found that lack of equipment in schools (Demirtaş et al., 2007), problems arising from the curriculum (Gündüz and Can, 2011; Taşdemir, 2015), constant change of the system (Akçadağ, 2013; Kara, 2020), insufficient number of classrooms, over-populated schools (Aslan, 2021), exam-oriented education (Taşdemir, 2015), problems arising from dual education (Özdoğru, 2021; Özsoy et al., 2022) were significantly challenging school principles.

Our study also pointed out some problems resulting from parents. It is widely accepted that parents acting in cooperation with the school and making joint efforts will support a positive climate in the school (Özdemir et al., 2010). In addition, families have a positive impact on raising academic standards at school (Karaman Kepenekçi, 2003). Therefore, the support of parents, who are the most important stakeholders of the school, is always needed (Yıldırım and Dönmez, 2008). In our study, the prominent parent-related problems were parental indifference, lack of participation in meetings, putting

pressure on teachers/the principal, unrealistic expectations, conflict of expectations with school goals, insufficient cooperation, low parental awareness, excessive confidence in their children, unfounded complaints, accusatory attitude, lack of support for the school and school-related problems. According to Kara (2020), one of the main problems of the Turkish education system is insufficient parental support and lack of effective parental involvement. Several studies have evidenced that schools are experiencing numerous such problems resulting from the ineffective involvement of parents or their lack of involvement at all (Aküzüm, 2017; Aslan, 2021; Gümüşeli, 2009; Memduhoğlu and Meriç, 2014; Özer et al., 2015; Taşdemir, 2015).

The synthesis of previous findings also yielded that some of the problems experienced by school leaders result from students. Participants from several of the studies pulled attention to students' lack of goals, excessive absenteeism, apathy, low motivation, undisciplined behavior, low success, wrong school choice, peer bullying, the prevalence of violence, excessive use of their phones during classes, damaging property and building negative relationships among themselves as significant problems to be tackled by the school leaders. According to Can (2022), various problems encountered by students can negatively affect school administration. Therefore, in order to overcome these problems, effective guidance services must be provided for students. Similarly, as stated by Demirtaş et al. (2007), a significant portion of the problems experienced at school are caused by students. Similarly, Çelik and Torlak (2006), stated that due to the increasing number of disciplinary problems among students, school administrators should first put these problems on their agenda and find creative solutions. Several other studies also indicated that problematic student behaviors (Demirtaş and Özer, 2014), absenteeism (Gümüşeli, 2002), deterioration in teacher-student relations (Taşdemir, 2015), and student apathy (Aydın, 2004) are problems that need to be held urgently and with utmost care.

The current analysis also revealed some teacher-related problems encountered by school leaders. Teachers have a very critical role in the success of an education system because they directly contribute to the education-training processes and influence student outcomes to a significant extent (Nalçacı and Sökmen, 2016). Problems related to teachers were listed as teacher's neglect of duty, lack of communication, resistance to change, insufficient knowledge of legislation, low awareness of duty, professional inadequacy, disruption in shifts, low performance, distrust of management, lack of contribution to management, excessive competition, grouping, jealousy, professional burnout, lack of cooperation, receiving frequent sick leaves, lack of communication skills, negative relations with parents, unwillingness to pursue professional development, overcriticizing the curriculum and working at the same school for a long time. As underlined by Arslan and Aslan (2014), problems with teachers negatively affect the quality of education and training and can reduce school effectiveness. In the same vein, TEDMEM's (2019) report points to the need for highly qualified teachers to improve the capacity of education. Other studies also revealed that groupings between teachers (Aslan, 2021), problems experienced during shifts (Günay and Özbilen, 2014), problems arising from communication (Çiftci, 2008; Bingöl, 2013); professional inadequacy (Aslan, 2021) and burnout (Arslan and Aslan, 2014; Cemaloğlu and Şahin, 2007) were among the significant problems facing school leaders and challenging school effectiveness.

Some of the problems were found to result from the school leaders themselves. One significant problem underlined by the participants

was the short duration of principals' duties in their offices. In addition, the selection and assignment of principals, which was often not merit-based, insufficient support provided to the principals by other school staff or the higher authorities, frequently receiving ungrounded complaints by particularly the parents, limited professional development opportunities, being too engaged with traditional management approaches, having to tackle with the abundance of non-educational chores were among the serious problems faced by the school leaders. School leaders have the primary responsibility for ensuring the quality of education in schools (Sağır and Emişoğlu, 2013), and their chief duty is to enable schools to attain educational goals in the best way possible (Eriş, 2012; Karakose et al., 2024a,b). While performing these duties, school leaders need to use all resources available at school effectively and efficiently (Usta and Boğa, 2021). Therefore, providing leaders with the necessary support and creating opportunities to facilitate their management roles is crucially important to ensure better performance of schools.

School leaders also had problems having an abundance of responsibilities with limited authority. Being too occupied with non-educational chores, they often have limited time to support instruction and create a learning-friendly atmosphere at school. Due to their limited authority, they cannot make independent decisions or make decisions take too long that the problems cannot be solved in time. Tanrıoğen and Yücel (2007) stated that the high workload of principals caused several serious problems endangering the attainment of educational goals. They also underline that school leaders have several problems managing schools due to having limited authority and autonomy in the case of both daily and critical problems. Similarly, several studies underline that school principals are too occupied with non-educational and bureaucratic work (Aküzüm, 2017; Koşar et al., 2013) and their authority is too limited with an insufficient share of their responsibilities (Aslan, 2021; Demirtaş and Özer, 2014). However, prominent researchers in the educational administration field state that principals should not be challenged or eroded by assigning them responsibilities for accomplishing impossible goals which are often incoherent, but should allow principals considerable discretion about school-level decisions as they know the best what priorities make the most sense in their schools (Gurr et al., 2022; Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood, 2023). It is crucial for policymakers and educational legislators that 'successful school principalship is an interactive, reciprocal and evolving process involving many players, which is influenced by and, in turn, influences, the context in which it occurs" (Mulford and Johns, 2004, p, 73).

Problems with the inspectors were also listed by some of the participants as a significant challenge facing school leaders. Particularly, inspectors' lack of expertise in supervising, their being closed to novel ideas, their reluctance to engage with professional development and their inability to provide sufficient guidance were among these serious problems. According to Tok (2002), such problems arising from inspectors are likely to affect the performance of teachers and school leaders negatively. Similarly, Ural and Ramazan (2007) state that especially the inspectors of preschool institutions are from outside the field, and thus lack subject expertise. Korkmaz and Özdoğan (2005) also lend support to these previous findings underlining that teachers and principals' performance could decrease significantly due to low-quality supervision of inspectors.

Constant changes in the legislation or the incessant increase in the number of regulations are considered to be greatly challenging,

particularly through entailing excessive bureaucracy and the likelihood of non-compliance with the legislation According to Usta and Boğa (2021), the main problem faced by school leaders are negative experiences related to legislation and regulations. Similarly, as the legislations change frequently (Memduhoğlu and Meriç, 2014), the abundance of bureaucratic work and the inability to adopt the expected changes (Aslan, 2021; Babaoğlan, 2007; Erol, 1995) become really problematic.

Another important problem mentioned in prior studies was related to school buildings. Başaran (2006) states that administrators have to devote a significant part of their time to tasks related to the maintenance of the school building. In the study of Robey and Helfenbein (2018), attention is drawn to the problems related to school building among the problems faced by school leaders. In the current study, the problems encountered by leaders were also related to constant maintenance and repair work, lack of space, the building's being too old, insufficient heating, lack of fixtures or the ineffective use of the fixtures and the large size of the building. As suggested by Memduhoğlu and Meriç (2014) the insufficient facilities and infrastructure at schools made the maintenance of schools quite challenging. Tösten et al.'s (2016) research lend support to these findings. Similarly, Çümen (2014) states that the problems with school buildings mostly result from insufficient or lack of planning prior to the construction of school buildings, which often lacks foresight.

In addition to these problems resulting from factors inside the school, participants also underlined some significant challenges from the school environment such as bureaucratic press, political pressure, and union repression and discord. Özcan (2014) support these findings stating that pressure groups seen in democracies can have an impact on schools, as in every field. Schools must have a strong philosophy in order to avoid being negatively affected by these pressure groups (Gurr et al., 2022). Similarly, several researchers stated that political interventions are one of the problems frequently encountered by school leaders (Aslan, 2021; Erol, 1995; Gedikoğlu, 2005; Kara, 2020; Karayaman, 2021). They have also concluded that unions and higher authorities are effective in the ethical dilemmas experienced by principals. Akcan et al. (2017) state that unions cause unethical behaviors, polarization and communication problems in schools. Additionally, political and union pressures have negative effects on the appointment of school principals (Demirtaş and Özer, 2014; Konan et al., 2017).

5 Conclusion

Providing the synthesis of problems and challenges most frequently encountered by school leaders, the current study drew attention to the significance of improving human resources, school budgets, curriculum and instruction, parental involvement, mechanisms to tackle student problematic behavior, and ensuring the professional quality of teachers, school leaders, and inspectors. As evidenced by school effectiveness and improvement research, improvement work depends on successful change management, which require strong, school-wide leadership practiced by not only the school principal but also by teachers, adequate resources, a strong will to maintain efforts even when things get harder as well as the involvement of all stakeholders including parents and students themselves in all attempts of improvement (Creemers et al., 2013; Dolph, 2017; Karakose, 2024). The studies also highlight the fact that

top-down policy initiatives to achieve standardized results from schools with a variety of context, history, and needs often fail to achieve the desired improvement because the success of such initiatives depend largely on the willingness and capability of staff to employ necessary actions as well as the availability of support, resources, and professional development opportunities (Harris, 2000). In addition, problems or challenges such as having larger number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, shortage of qualified teachers, low-quality staffing, unwillingness of parents or teachers to support improvement efforts, the inadequacy of resources or school infrastructure are all mentioned as significant barriers against sustainable improvement (Dolph, 2017).

From this perspective, our results indicate that school principals in Turkish schools are facing critical problems that could significantly impede school improvement efforts. The results show that school principals have to be so involved in the basic maintenance of schools, coping with external pressures, and seeking basic resources that they have little or no time to practice their leadership roles such as establishing a shared vision which guides the efforts of all stakeholders to achieving clear goals of improvement. Being deprived of the decision-making authority over the staffing, budgeting, resourcing or restructuring of their school, school principals seem to lack the necessary power to improve the effectiveness of their school. Therefore, our findings point to the significance of providing school leaders with the necessary support while expecting them to realize an abundance of responsibilities as well as allowing the sufficient authority to make decisions while realizing these responsibilities. One way of doing that could be providing school leaders with opportunities to form network relationships with the leaders of other schools, which in turn could support their professional development and provide necessary guidance from people experiencing similar problems (Gümüş et al., 2024; Leithwood, 2019). In addition, significant problems that arise from bureaucratic pressures, political press and union discord should be crucially considered by the higher authorities if school leaders are expected to contribute to the sustainable improvement of schools (Pashiardis and Kafa, 2022).

The current study also suggests some implications for future studies. For one thing, our study highlights that several problems and challenges are faced by school principals which not only limit their capacity to lead the improvement of their school but also place a strong barrier to school improvement efforts often compelled by top-down, theory-driven policy initiatives without actual awareness of the conditions and context of schools. Therefore, investigations into the problems and challenges faced by school principals in differing school contexts could contribute to understanding how such problems could be impeding school improvement and what factors should be addressed to sustain successful school improvement. For the other, our study focused on solely the problems and challenges but a focus on alternative solutions or coping strategies is also necessary to be able to offer an evidence-based perspective into how school principals can best be enabled to sustain the improvement of their schools.

Data availability statement

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

Author contributions

TK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MO: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NM: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

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

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