



Leading under Scrutiny: Exploring The Impact of Cyprus's Teacher Evaluation System - A Systematic Review

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Abstract

In the context of increasing global emphasis on accountability in education, teacher evaluation systems have become key mechanisms for monitoring and improving instructional quality. This systematic review investigates how Cyprus's national teacher evaluation system influences instructional leadership practices in primary schools. Drawing on international and regional literature, the study aims to synthesise existing evidence on the intended and unintended consequences of evaluation frameworks on school leadership, with a specific focus on the Cypriot context. The review includes peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and empirical studies published between 2005 and 2024, with emphasis on post 2010, selected through rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria. The analysis identifies four dominant themes: erosion and narrowing of instructional leadership under performative accountability; principals' mediation and reframing of evaluation policy; structural constraints in small, centralised systems; and tensions between compliance, trust, and professional learning. Findings highlight how the Cypriot system, characterised by centralisation and high-stakes assessment, places significant pressure on school leaders, often constraining their instructional autonomy while demanding compliance with rigid performance indicators. The review concludes with recommendations for designing evaluation systems that balance accountability with professional trust and support instructional leadership development. Implications are discussed for policymakers, educational leaders, and researchers seeking to understand and improve evaluation-led reform in small-state education systems.

Keywords: Teacher evaluation, Cyprus education system, School leadership, professional development, centralised systems

1. Introduction

In recent decades, education systems worldwide have adopted formal teacher evaluation policies as part of efforts to enhance instructional quality, ensure accountability and support professional development. These systems typically pursue multiple, and sometimes competing, purposes: improving teaching, monitoring performance and informing personnel decisions. While policy rhetoric often emphasises improved learning outcomes and strengthened instructional capacity, research shows that evaluation frameworks can produce

complex and unintended consequences, particularly for school leaders charged with enacting them (Tuytens & Devos, 2014; Hallinger & Lee, 2013).

Within this global trend, instructional leadership has emerged as a critical mediator between policy expectations and classroom practice. School leaders are no longer viewed as primarily administrative managers; they are expected to guide pedagogical improvement, ensure policy compliance and foster teacher accountability. Understanding how teacher evaluation systems shape instructional leadership is therefore central to assessing the effectiveness and sustainability of education reforms.

In Cyprus, recent changes to teacher evaluation reflect this move towards intensified accountability. Historically characterised by centralised governance and limited differentiation in teacher performance management, the Cypriot education system has introduced new evaluative frameworks aimed at aligning teaching quality with national priorities (Papanastasiou et al., 2003). These reforms place school leaders in a pivotal position, often requiring them to reconcile bureaucratic expectations with the pedagogical and relational dimensions of leadership. Yet limited research has systematically examined how these evaluation practices affect the nature and exercise of instructional leadership in the Cypriot context.

This paper addresses that gap through a systematic review of literature on Cyprus's teacher evaluation system and its impact on instructional leadership in primary education. It synthesises and critically analyses studies that explore how evaluation policies shape leadership practices, roles and challenges. To ensure methodological rigour, the study adopts a systematic review design suited to qualitative and policy-oriented educational research. The review focuses on how leaders navigate these systems, the tensions that arise between accountability and autonomy and the implications for school improvement and educational equity. By situating the Cypriot case within broader international debates on accountability and leadership, the study contributes to a more context-sensitive understanding of evaluation-driven reform in small, centralised education systems (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012).

The review is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the documented impacts of Cyprus's teacher evaluation system on instructional leadership practices in primary schools?
2. What challenges and tensions do school leaders face in enacting these evaluation policies?
3. How do findings from the Cypriot context contribute to international debates on evaluation, leadership and accountability?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

2.1 Teacher evaluation systems and leadership tensions

Teacher evaluation has become a central feature of global education reform, driven by ambitions to improve teaching quality and strengthen accountability. The literature, however, highlights persistent tensions between developmental and performative purposes (Tuytens & Devos, 2014). Formative approaches aim to support teacher growth, whereas summative systems, especially those tied to career progression or institutional performance, often prioritise compliance and surveillance. These contradictions are magnified in centralised systems such as Cyprus, where reform is typically top-down and contextually rigid (Erotocritou Stavrou & Koutselini, 2016).

Although the importance of contextual alignment and professional trust is well recognised (OECD, 2020), relatively little research examines how leaders in small-state contexts interpret and respond to evaluation structures. Studies show that accountability regimes can reproduce inequities and erode trust, raising questions about fairness and leadership legitimacy (Ainscow & Chapman, 2025; Datnow, 2020). Leithwood (2023) argues that, without systemic support and distributed leadership, evaluation tends to shift principals' focus from sustained instructional development to performative compliance. These tensions are therefore not only conceptual but embedded in the daily work of school leaders.

2.2 Instructional leadership under accountability pressures

Instructional leadership is often described as the most influential school-level factor affecting student outcomes (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). Yet there is growing concern about whether such leadership can flourish under high-stakes accountability. Grissom et al. (2021) show that evaluation frameworks frequently distort leadership priorities, with principals devoting increasing time to data monitoring and administrative tasks at the expense of pedagogical guidance.

Recent studies illustrate how these distortions manifest in practice. Leithwood (2023) emphasises that leadership impact on student learning is contingent on distributed support structures; in their absence, accountability pressures narrow the focus to compliance. Research during and after the COVID-19 pandemic further highlights the psychological toll on leaders, who struggle to uphold instructional standards while sustaining teacher morale (Dhandapani & Kamaljeet, 2024). In Cyprus, however, empirical evidence on how principals balance these demands remains limited. With autonomy tightly constrained, questions persist about the extent to which Cypriot principals can resist performative evaluation pressures and maintain a focus on long-term instructional development.

2.3 Leadership agency and policy enactment

To understand how school leaders respond to evaluation pressures, this review draws on policy enactment theory (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). This framework conceptualises policy not as a fixed script but as a dynamic process interpreted, negotiated and reshaped by local actors within specific material, discursive and cultural contexts. It highlights leaders' agency in navigating tensions between policy expectations and school realities. Empirical research increasingly portrays leaders as mediators, translators or resisters of policy (Peurach et al., 2019; Kulz, 2022), especially when reforms conflict with professional norms or ignore contextual demands.

In high-stakes environments, leaders may engage in 'refraction', adapting or deflecting policy to minimise harm (Gunter & Courtney, 2023). Other work on performativity and data cultures shows how principals internalise, reinterpret or strategically manage accountability pressures in ways that blend compliance with creativity (Wilkins & Olmedo, 2018). In highly centralised systems such as Cyprus, where structural constraints on autonomy are deeply embedded, this perspective is particularly salient. Studies in small-state or centralised contexts (Kaparou & Bush, 2015; Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2017; Karamanidou & Bush, 2017) depict principals as operating in a "double bind": expected to implement evaluation reforms faithfully while also preserving collegiality, trust and school-specific priorities.

2.4 Synthesis and research gap

Despite substantial research on school evaluation and leadership, gaps remain regarding how evaluation policy shapes leadership in highly centralised and under-researched contexts such as Cyprus. Much work focuses on quantifiable outcomes, test scores, appraisal results or improvement metrics (OECD, 2020; Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2017), rather than the

relational and professional dimensions of leadership, including identity, agency and influence. Complementary evidence from a recent systematic review of Cypriot primary teachers' experiences highlights similar tensions between accountability pressures, professional autonomy and system-level constraints, suggesting that the leadership challenges identified in this review are embedded within broader teacher working conditions (Karamanidou, 2025b).

Recent scholarship questions narrow notions of accountability and documents clashes between evaluation logics and leaders' pedagogical values or local priorities (Wilkins & Olmedo, 2018; Heystek, 2022). In centralised systems, leaders often resort to symbolic compliance, navigating tensions between hierarchical expectations and professional judgement (Kaparou & Bush, 2017). Karamanidou (2025a) shows that in Cyprus, rigid bureaucratic expectations and hierarchical oversight can make evaluation policies feel demoralising and performative, undermining collaboration and trust. Gendered and cultural factors further shape these dynamics.

Yet the Cypriot context remains under-explored, particularly regarding how principals interpret and operationalise evaluation policy in daily practice and how they mediate between top-down frameworks and local realities (Phtiaka, 2002). This review, therefore synthesises evidence at the intersection of evaluation policy and leadership practice in Cyprus. Framed through policy enactment theory, it seeks to unpack how principals interpret, negotiate and reshape policy within a highly centralised system and to generate insights relevant for other small-state or centralised education systems.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This article employs a systematic review design, using explicit procedures for literature search, selection and analysis to enhance rigour and transparency (Gough, Oliver & Thomas, 2017). The review critically synthesises knowledge on the relationship between teacher evaluation systems and leadership practice, with a particular focus on Cyprus as a small-state, centralised education system. The review followed established principles for systematic reviews in education, including explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, transparent search procedures, and a structured approach to data synthesis, adapted for qualitative and policy-oriented research. A qualitative synthesis approach was adopted to explore how school leaders interpret, enact and respond to evaluation policy, supporting analytical rather than statistical generalisation (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Policy enactment theory (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) provided the conceptual frame for selecting and interpreting studies.

3.2 Context: Cyprus's evaluation system and primary school structure

The Cypriot case is characterised by highly centralised governance and an inspector-led, largely summative evaluation system overseen by the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth. Teacher appraisal is closely linked to promotion, based on lesson observations and file audits rather than structured professional development or formative feedback (Erotocritou Stavrou & Koutselini, 2016). Primary education consists largely of small schools, especially in rural areas, and principal posts are typically filled by experienced teachers with limited formal leadership preparation. Principals have restricted autonomy over staffing, curriculum and budgeting yet are responsible for implementing evaluation policy. These features make Cyprus a compelling setting for examining tensions between top-down accountability and school-level leadership agency.

3.3 Data collection: search strategy

Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Web of Science, ERIC and Scopus, supplemented by manual screening of reference lists. Studies were eligible if they focused on teacher evaluation systems, leadership practices or policy enactment in Cyprus or comparable small-state, centralised education systems (Thorpe & Karamanidou, 2024). Eligible sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral theses and policy reports presenting empirical data.

The review targeted literature published between 2005 and 2024, with particular attention to post-2010 work, reflecting intensified global accountability reforms. Studies in English or Greek using qualitative, mixed-methods or conceptually grounded designs were included, provided they demonstrated clear relevance to leadership and evaluation dynamics. Exclusion criteria were: purely theoretical pieces without empirical grounding, studies unrelated to leadership or evaluation and those focusing solely on student outcomes. The initial search identified 212 records; after removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts, 18 studies met the inclusion criteria. These comprised eight empirical studies from Cyprus, five comparative studies on small or centralised systems, three policy documents and two conceptual papers applying policy enactment theory to school leadership.

Screening and study selection were conducted by the author in two stages. Titles and abstracts were reviewed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria to assess relevance to teacher evaluation, leadership and the Cypriot or comparable small-state context. Full texts of potentially relevant studies were examined to confirm eligibility, and decisions at both stages were guided by pre-defined criteria to ensure consistency. As this was a single-author review, formal dual screening and inter-rater reliability statistics were not applied; however, consistency was supported through the use of explicit inclusion criteria, iterative checking of borderline cases and repeated review of decisions during the synthesis process.

The final database search was completed in June 2024, and searches were limited to studies published in English and Greek, reflecting the languages of publication most relevant to the Cypriot context. Search strings combined terms related to teacher evaluation (e.g. 'teacher appraisal', 'inspection', 'performance evaluation') with leadership-related terms (e.g. 'instructional leadership', 'school leadership', 'principal') and contextual identifiers (e.g. 'Cyprus', 'small-state', 'centralised system'). Greek-language searches were conducted using translated equivalents of key terms (e.g. αξιολόγηση εκπαιδευτικών, εκπαιδευτική ηγεσία, διευθυντής σχολείου), particularly to capture locally published research, doctoral theses and policy-related studies. Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine results. Screening occurred in two stages: (1) title and abstract review to assess relevance, followed by (2) full-text screening against the inclusion criteria. The study selection process is summarised in a PRISMA-style flow diagram (Figure 1), illustrating the stages of identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion. Search terms were adapted slightly across databases to accommodate platform-specific syntax. While purely theoretical studies without relevance to leadership practice were excluded, two conceptual papers were retained due to their direct application of policy enactment theory to school leadership and evaluation contexts. These studies were not treated as empirical evidence but were used to inform the analytical framing and interpretation of findings during synthesis.

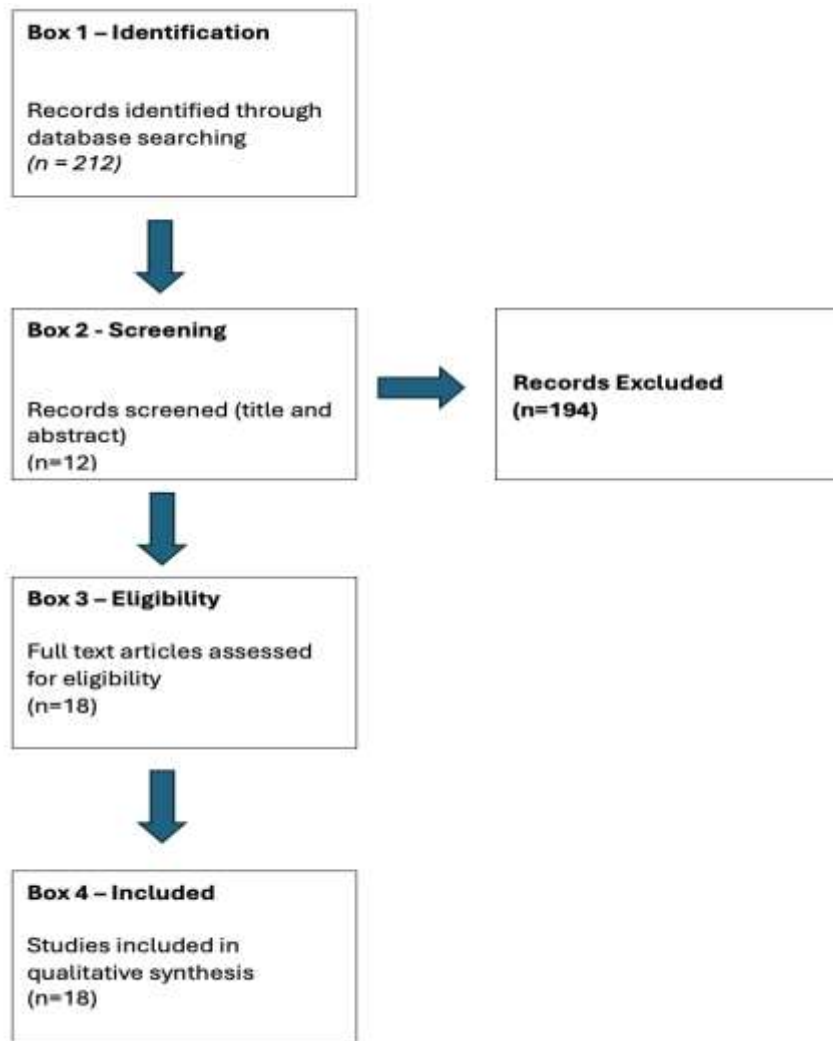


Figure 1. PRISMA-style flow diagram of the literature search and study selection process.

3.4 Data analysis and ethical considerations

The studies were analysed using thematic synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The methodological quality of included studies was appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), which is designed for reviews incorporating qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods research. Appraisal focused on the clarity of research questions, appropriateness of methodology, transparency of data collection and analysis, and coherence between data, analysis and conclusions. Quality appraisal was used to inform interpretation during synthesis rather than as a criterion for exclusion, given the limited volume of empirical research on the Cypriot context.

Coding was conducted iteratively, beginning with inductive coding of findings sections, followed by deductive alignment with concepts from policy enactment theory. Themes were refined through constant comparison across studies to ensure internal coherence and analytical distinctiveness. Findings from methodologically stronger studies were given greater analytical weight during theme development, while insights from more descriptive or conceptually oriented studies were used primarily to contextualise patterns rather than to substantiate core claims.

Conceptual studies informed the analytical lens rather than contributing directly to the empirical findings. The findings, discussion and implications sections of each study,

generated codes such as ‘instructional leadership tensions’, ‘bureaucratic compliance’, ‘policy mediation’ and ‘trust in evaluation’. These codes were grouped into broader themes aligned with the analytical focus of the review. Four themes emerged: erosion of instructional leadership under performative accountability; principals’ agency in enacting or reframing evaluation policy; contextual constraints in small, centralised systems; and tensions between compliance and professional trust. These themes were interpreted through policy enactment theory, attending to interpretation, translation, resistance and adaptation (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012).

Data extraction focused on key study characteristics and analytical dimensions relevant to the review questions. Extracted data included study context and setting, research design, features of the teacher evaluation system, reported impacts on leadership practice, and authors’ interpretations of leadership agency, accountability and professional learning. Extraction was guided by a structured template aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework. As a review of existing studies, this research did not require formal ethical approval. Ethical standards for secondary analysis were followed, including accurate attribution, transparent documentation of inclusion and exclusion criteria and careful representation of original findings. The researcher adopted a reflexive stance, recognising her own location within a similar educational context and seeking to avoid over-generalisation from specific cases.

Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of the studies included in the review, including their context, design and relevance to the Cypriot education system.

Table 1. Summary of studies included in the systematic review

Author(s) & Year	Context / Country	Study Design	Sample / Data	Focus and Relevance to Cyprus
Phtiaka (2002)	Cyprus	Qualitative / policy-oriented	Policy texts; teacher education discourse	Examines systemic features of Cypriot education and professional cultures relevant to evaluation and leadership.
Papanastasiou et al. (2003)	Cyprus	Conceptual / contextual analysis	Social and educational policy analysis	Provides contextual grounding on Cypriot educational governance and values shaping evaluation practices.
Kaparou & Bush (2015)	Greece	Qualitative multiple case study	Interviews with school leaders	Relevant comparator due to centralised governance structures similar to Cyprus.
Damianidou & Phtiaka (2017)	Cyprus	Qualitative case study	Teacher and school-level perspectives	Illustrates structural and cultural constraints within Cypriot schools under centralised policies.
Karamanidou & Bush (2017)	Cyprus	Qualitative interview study	Women primary school principals	Explores leadership experiences and systemic barriers within the Cypriot

Author(s) & Year	Context / Country	Study Design	Sample / Data	Focus and Relevance to Cyprus
				context.
Erotocritou Stavrou & Koutselini (2016)	Cyprus	Qualitative / practitioner-focused	Teacher perspectives	Highlights pedagogical practices and system-level constraints relevant to evaluation and leadership.
Kaparou & Bush (2017)	Greece	Qualitative analysis	School leader accounts	Demonstrates symbolic compliance and leadership mediation under accountability pressures.
Flores & Derrington (2017)	Portugal / USA	Comparative qualitative study	Principal interviews	Provides comparative insight into leadership responses to teacher evaluation policies in centralised systems.
Hallinger & Lee (2013)	Thailand	Qualitative / mixed-methods	School leaders	International comparator illustrating leadership capacity under reform pressures.
Grissom et al. (2021)	International (USA-focused)	Systematic review	Empirical leadership studies	Synthesises evidence on how accountability and evaluation shape leadership practice.
Leithwood (2023)	International	Narrative review	Leadership research literature	Supports theoretical understanding of leadership resources under accountability.
Wilkins & Olmedo (2018)	International	Conceptual / policy analysis	Governance and accountability literature	Informs interpretation of performativity and policy enactment in evaluation systems.
Gunter & Courtney (2023)	England	Policy analysis	National policy documents	Illustrates performativity and policy mortality relevant to Cypriot reform trajectories.
Shah & Campbell (2023)	Canada	Systematic review	Leadership and professional learning studies	Provides contrast with trust-based evaluation models.
Ninković & Florić (2024)	International	Systematic review	Leadership and teaching studies	Highlights indirect leadership effects mediated by professional learning.

Author(s) & Year	Context / Country	Study Design	Sample / Data	Focus and Relevance to Cyprus
Thorpe & Karamanidou (2024)	Cyprus / England	Qualitative governance study	Complementary school leadership	Offers insight into leadership agency and governance in Cypriot-related contexts.
Karamanidou (2025a)	Cyprus	Qualitative longitudinal study	Primary school principals	Direct empirical evidence on leadership development and evaluation pressures in Cyprus.
Karamanidou (2025b)	Cyprus	Systematic Review	Literature on primary school teachers	Direct evidence on challenges of primary school teachers in Cyprus.
Karamanidou (2026)	Cyprus	Qualitative study	Primary school headteachers	Evidence on sustainable leadership in Cyprus primary schools
Bros & Schechter (2022)	Israel	Qualitative policy study	School leaders and policymakers	Relevant for understanding policy coherence and leadership enactment in small-state systems.

4. Findings

The thematic synthesis of the 18 included studies generated four interrelated themes that illuminate how Cyprus's teacher evaluation system shapes school leadership in primary education: (1) erosion and narrowing of instructional leadership under performative accountability; (2) principals' mediation and reframing of evaluation policy; (3) structural constraints in small, centralised systems; and (4) tensions between compliance, trust, and professional learning.

4.1 Erosion and narrowing of instructional leadership

This theme is strongly supported by empirical studies conducted in Cyprus, which document the narrowing of instructional leadership under inspector-led evaluation, and is further reinforced by comparative evidence from other centralised systems. Across Cypriot and comparative studies, teacher evaluation was consistently associated with a narrowing of leadership practice. Rather than strengthening instructional guidance, summative, inspector-led evaluation regimes tended to prioritise compliance, documentation, and visible performance over sustained pedagogical development. Principals reported spending substantial time preparing staff for observations and managing external expectations, often at the expense of coaching, collaborative planning, or curriculum work. These patterns echo international evidence that high-stakes accountability can distort leadership priorities away from deep instructional engagement and towards administrative monitoring (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood, 2023).

4.2 Principals as policy mediators and refractors

A second theme concerned the ways principals mediate, translate, or refract evaluation

policy. Studies from Cyprus and other small-state systems showed that school leaders rarely implement evaluation requirements in a purely linear manner. Instead, they selectively reinterpret guidelines, soften their impact on staff, or frame evaluation processes as developmental rather than punitive where possible (Karamanidou, 2025a; Kaparou & Bush, 2015). This mediating work is often invisible in official policy accounts but central to how evaluation is experienced in schools.

4.3 Structural constraints in small, centralised systems

The third theme highlighted the profound influence of structural and governance arrangements. In Cyprus, strong ministerial control, inspector-led evaluation, and limited school-level autonomy constrained principals' scope for discretion. Decision-making over staffing, curriculum, and resource allocation remained centralised, leaving leaders responsible for implementing evaluation policy without equivalent authority to shape its conditions or consequences (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2017; Phtiaka, 2002). Comparative studies from Greece and Portugal reported similar patterns of tight political control and restricted leadership agency in centralised systems (Kaparou & Bush, 2015; Flores & Derrington, 2017).

4.4 Tensions between compliance, trust, and professional learning

The final theme concerned tensions between fulfilling compliance demands and nurturing professional trust and learning. Principals frequently described evaluation as undermining collegial relationships, generating anxiety among teachers, and reinforcing hierarchical inspection cultures. At the same time, some leaders attempted to use evaluation moments to open dialogue about teaching and learning, or to protect staff from the most punitive aspects of policy (Karamanidou, 2025a; Thorpe & Karamanidou, 2024). International evidence from more trust-based systems, such as Ontario or Finland, suggests that when evaluation is explicitly designed as formative and dialogic, it can support rather than erode professional cultures (Shah & Campbell, 2023). The juxtaposition of these models underscores the unresolved tensions within Cyprus's current evaluation framework.

5. Discussion of Findings

This systematic review examined how Cyprus's teacher evaluation system shapes school leadership, using policy enactment theory (Ball & Olmedo, 2013) as the main analytical lens. A systemic perspective was adopted to trace how structures, agency, and ideology interact to influence leadership practice in a centralised small-state context. Recent Cyprus-based research on sustainable leadership further reinforces these findings, highlighting how long-term instructional improvement depends on leadership continuity, trust-based professional cultures and alignment between accountability demands and school-level capacity (Karamanidou, 2026). While the core empirical evidence derives from Cyprus-based studies, insights from comparator systems were used analytically rather than inferentially. These studies were selected due to shared structural characteristics, including centralised governance, inspector-led evaluation and limited school-level autonomy. Comparative evidence was therefore used to contextualise and illuminate Cypriot findings, not to generalise beyond them.

5.1 Systemic layers shaping leadership practice

Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic synthesis approach, the analysis revealed multi-layered dynamics involving structural constraints, leadership agency and ideological context. Cyprus's inspector-led, summative evaluation model (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2017) forms a structural layer that restricts autonomy and reinforces compliance. This framework is

enacted through principals' interpretive work: school leaders frequently adapt evaluation demands to sustain trust and instructional coherence (Karamanidou, 2025a).

At the ideological level, a culture of standardisation and measurable performance tends to override professional judgement, contributing to the performative character of evaluation (Erotocritou Stavrou & Koutselini, 2016). International research identifies similar patterns. Leithwood (2023) shows that accountability regimes without adequate support narrow leadership work. A recent US study also suggests that evaluation rituals can become ends in themselves, displacing deeper pedagogical engagement. Taken together, these findings highlight how policy design, organisational conditions and leadership identities jointly shape how evaluation is enacted in schools.

5.2 International systems and lessons from Cyprus for small-state contexts

Cyprus's experience is broadly consistent with that of other centralised or small-state systems such as Greece and Portugal, where principals operate under strong political control and limited discretion (Kaparou & Bush, 2015; Flores & Derrington, 2017). In contrast, systems like Ontario incorporate professional trust and structured feedback loops into evaluation, which tends to soften compliance pressures and create more space for instructional leadership (Shah & Campbell, 2023).

Scandinavian cases offer a further point of comparison, and a 2024 study reports that leadership impact there is mediated by teacher collaboration, professional learning communities and teacher self-efficacy, features that help integrate accountability with support (Ninković & Florić, 2024). Cyprus lacks many of these buffering structures. As a result, summative evaluation is more likely to be experienced as externally imposed inspection than as a driver of professional learning.

Cyprus therefore functions as both a cautionary and instructive case. The system illustrates how centralised evaluation can marginalise instructional leadership, yet it also shows that micro-level adaptation is possible (Thorpe & Karamanidou, 2024). For other small states, the key lesson is that the transfer of accountability policies without contextual adaptation risks undermining leadership agency. Viewing leadership as policy enactment rather than simple implementation (Ball & Olmedo, 2013) foregrounds principals as active agents who translate and reshape policy. Even within tight constraints, they attempt to protect instructional coherence and professional trust (Karamanidou, 2025a). Supporting this agency through both training and structural reform remains critical.

5.3 Implications for leadership practice and identity

The findings indicate that principals in Cyprus face conflicting imperatives. They are expected to enforce summative evaluation procedures while also upholding instructional expertise and collegial trust. Grissom et al. (2021) warn that evaluation frameworks can distort leadership priorities by shifting attention from coaching to compliance. In Cyprus, this effect appears pronounced: bureaucratic rigidity and limited trust erode leadership identity and encourage defensive, risk-averse practice.

However, an enactment perspective suggests that principals do not simply capitulate to these pressures. Some leaders strategically reinterpret evaluation demands, for example by framing them as opportunities for dialogue or by moderating feedback to align more closely with pedagogical goals (Karamanidou, 2025a; Erotocritou Stavrou & Koutselini, 2016). These practices mitigate some of the harmful effects of high-stakes evaluation. Yet, in the absence of systemic support, such as distributed leadership structures or clearly defined formative pathways, the responsibility for such mediation falls on individuals. This leads to uneven and sometimes fragile enactment strategies across schools.

The review therefore points to an urgent need for systemic reform. Evidence from jurisdictions such as Ontario and Finland suggests that evaluation models which integrate formative feedback, peer review and reflective dialogue can promote both accountability and professional learning (Shah & Campbell, 2023). Cyprus could adapt elements of these approaches by introducing school-based peer observation, internally moderated evaluations and structured professional conversations. Bros and Schechter's (2022) analysis of small-state reforms reinforces this point: coherence between key stakeholders is a major determinant of policy success. Where ministry departments issue overlapping or contradictory mandates, principals encounter role conflict and reduced policy ownership. A more unified evaluation framework, grounded in reflective dialogue rather than punitive assessment, would likely enhance both compliance and instructional focus (Karamanidou, 2025a).

6. Conclusion

This systematic review explored how Cyprus's teacher evaluation system affects school leadership in a centralised small-state context. Using policy enactment theory (Ball & Olmedo, 2013) and thematic synthesis, it identified four main dynamics: the narrowing of instructional leadership under performative accountability, principals' mediation and reframing of policy, the impact of structural constraints and ongoing tensions between compliance, trust and professional learning. The review shows that evaluation policy does not simply translate into practice in linear ways; instead, it is interpreted, negotiated and sometimes resisted by school leaders working within restrictive governance arrangements.

6.1 Contributions

The review offers three main contributions: leadership agency, systemic incoherence in Cyprus and a comparative/small-state perspective. It foregrounds the agency of Cypriot school leaders as policy enactors. Principals do not merely implement evaluation mandates but actively buffer, reinterpret and selectively apply them to preserve collegial relationships and maintain a focus on teaching and learning (Karamanidou, 2025a; Thorpe & Karamanidou, 2024). It exposes systemic incoherence in the current arrangements. Overlapping directives, inspector-led summative practices and limited school autonomy undermine role clarity and make it difficult to build a culture of professional learning. By placing the Cypriot case alongside evidence from Greece, Portugal, Ontario, Finland and Scandinavia, the review provides a comparative perspective on how evaluation systems operate in different structural and cultural contexts. This highlights the risks of importing accountability models into small states without adequate attention to local capacity and professional trust.

6.2 Implications for policy and leadership

For policymakers, the findings underscore the need to redesign teacher evaluation so that it combines accountability with capacity-building. This entails clarifying leadership expectations, reducing conflicting mandates and embedding formative, dialogic elements such as peer review, mentoring and collaborative inquiry. A coherent framework that treats principals as partners in policy design and enactment, rather than as mere implementers, would increase the likelihood that evaluation supports instructional improvement instead of constraining it.

For school leaders, the review highlights the importance of policy literacy and strategic enactment. Principals require skills to interpret policy texts, navigate contradictions and construct spaces for professional learning under external pressure. Leadership development programmes in Cyprus should therefore address policy enactment, distributed leadership and

the use of evaluation processes as opportunities for critical reflection on pedagogy and equity. From a sustainability perspective, recent work on Cypriot primary schools emphasises that leadership practices are unlikely to endure unless evaluation systems are aligned with long-term capacity-building and professional trust rather than short-term performative compliance (Karamanidou, 2026).

To enhance the applied contribution of this review, a phased roadmap (see below) is proposed that outlines feasible actions, key stakeholders and indicative timelines for strengthening teacher evaluation and instructional leadership in Cyprus.

Phase 1: Short-term (within 12 months)

Low-cost, high-feasibility actions:

- Stakeholders: Ministry of Education, inspectorate, school principals
- Actions:
 - Clarify the developmental versus summative purposes of teacher evaluation through revised guidance.
 - Introduce structured professional dialogue linked to existing evaluation moments (e.g. post-observation discussions).
- Feasibility: High (builds on existing structures, minimal legislative change).

Phase 2: Medium-term (1-3 years)

Capacity-building and pilot reform:

- Stakeholders: Ministry of Education, leadership development providers, school leaders
- Actions:
 - Pilot school-based peer observation and mentoring models in selected primary schools.
 - Integrate policy enactment and evaluative literacy into principal preparation and in-service leadership development.
- Feasibility: Moderate (requires training and coordination but not systemic overhaul).

Phase 3: Longer-term (3-5 years)

Systemic alignment and sustainability:

- Stakeholders: Ministry of Education, inspectorate, policymakers, professional associations
- Actions:
 - Gradually rebalance evaluation frameworks to reduce high-stakes consequences and strengthen formative feedback.
 - Align inspection, evaluation and professional learning policies to reduce contradictory mandates.
- Feasibility: Challenging but necessary for sustainable change.

This roadmap is intended as an indicative guide rather than a prescriptive reform plan and should be adapted to local contexts and stakeholder capacity.

6.3 Limitations and future research

As with many systematic reviews, this study is subject to potential publication bias. Although policy reports and doctoral research were included where available, relevant grey literature, such as Ministry of Education policy documents, inspectorate guidance and internal evaluation frameworks, may not be fully represented. In the Cypriot context, where policy influence is strong and research output is relatively limited, such documents play a significant role in shaping evaluation practice and leadership experience. Future research could integrate systematic analysis of Ministry of Education and inspectorate documents to provide a more comprehensive account of evaluation policy enactment.

The review is constrained by the relatively small number of empirical studies on Cyprus and by the predominance of qualitative case research. Its conclusions should thus be read as analytically rather than statistically generalisable. While the review followed systematic procedures, the scope was constrained by the limited volume of empirical research on Cyprus and by language and database boundaries typical of small-state education systems. Although all included studies met baseline quality criteria, variation in methodological robustness was taken into account during synthesis, with stronger empirical studies informing the central analytical claims. There is a clear need for longitudinal studies that trace how leadership identities and practices evolve as evaluation reforms are implemented over time. Multi-perspective case studies that include principals, teachers, inspectors and policymakers would also enrich understanding of the relational and institutional dynamics involved in policy enactment. Comparative work across other small-state or highly centralised systems could help build a more fine-grained typology of leadership responses to accountability reform and illuminate alternative evaluation models that better integrate professional trust and learning.

While this review focused on instructional leadership, recent synthesis of Cypriot teachers' perspectives points to parallel experiences of performativity and professional constraint, indicating the value of future research that jointly examines leadership and teacher enactment of evaluation policy (Karamanidou, 2025b). Overall, the review suggests that while evaluation policy in Cyprus currently constrains instructional leadership, it also opens spaces for creative enactment. Recognising and supporting this leadership agency through coherent policy, trust-based evaluation designs and robust professional learning opportunities is essential for sustainable school improvement in Cyprus and in other systems facing similar tensions between accountability and professional autonomy.

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