AI in Educational Leadership: Investigating its use in School Leaders' Daily Practice

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Abstract: School leaders play a central role in educational leadership by supporting teaching and learning, guiding teachers, and ensuring the effective operation of schools. As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly integrated into education, school leaders are expected to evaluate and use AI in ways that support both administrative and pedagogical responsibilities. Although AI offers new opportunities for decision support and information management, its role in educational leadership remains underexplored. The aim of this study is to explore how school leaders perceive the impact of AI on their professional practice. The study was guided by two research questions: How do school leaders perceive the impact of AI on their professional practice? And What opportunities and challenges do school leaders associate with the use of AI in their professional practice? A qualitative research design was adopted. Three school leaders from Swedish primary schools (grades F-6) participated in semi-structured online interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes each. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis identified three themes. First, AI was perceived as a professional support tool that assists school leaders with administration, information management, data analysis, and reflection. Second, although AI supports professional practice, human judgement, ethical responsibility, and contextual understanding remain essential in educational leadership. Third, responsible AI use depends on school leaders' digital competence, critical evaluation, effective prompting, and an understanding of AI's possibilities and limitations. The findings suggest that AI is becoming an increasingly important part of educational leadership. However, school leaders perceive AI as supporting instead of replacing professional practice. This study contributes empirical insights into how school leaders integrate AI into their everyday work and highlights that successful AI use depends on the balance between technological support, professional judgement, and responsible leadership.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence (AI), Decision support, Digital competence, Educational leadership, School leaders

1. Introduction

School leaders play a central role in the development of schools. They are responsible for both pedagogical leadership and administrative management, supporting teachers, improving teaching and learning, and ensuring that schools function effectively. Their work requires continuous decision-making in complex educational environments, where they balance organisational responsibilities with the educational needs of teachers and students (Daniëls et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020).

At the same time, artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming increasingly integrated into education (Chen et al., 2020). AI applications are now used to support administrative work, analyse educational data, assist planning, and provide decision support. As these technologies become more common, they also influence the work of school leaders. AI offers opportunities to improve efficiency, strengthen data-informed decision-making, and reduce administrative workload. However, it also raises questions concerning professional judgement, ethics, responsibility, and digital competence.

Although research on AI in education has expanded rapidly, much of the existing literature focuses on teaching, learning, or students' use of AI (Díaz & Nussbaum, 2024; Pedro et al., 2019; Yim & Su, 2025). Comparatively less attention has been paid to how AI influences the professional practice of school leaders (Adams & Thompson, 2025). Yet school leaders are responsible for decisions that affect teachers, students, and the overall development of schools. Understanding how they perceive AI, where they identify opportunities, and where they recognise limitations is therefore becoming increasingly important.

The aim of this study is to explore how school leaders perceive the impact of AI on their professional practice. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do school leaders perceive the impact of AI on their professional practice as school leaders?

RQ2: What opportunities and challenges do school leaders associate with the use of AI in their professional practice?

2. Background

This section provides the theoretical and research background for the study. First, it introduces educational leadership and the responsibilities of school leaders. It then discusses the growing role of artificial intelligence

in educational leadership and highlights current research on how AI may support school leaders while also presenting new challenges. Finally, the section identifies the knowledge gap that this study seeks to address.

2.1 Educational Leadership

Educational leadership plays a central role in the development and quality of schools. Research describes school leaders as being responsible not only for administrative management but also for creating conditions that support teaching, learning, and school improvement (Daniëls et al., 2019). Their work includes leading teachers, managing organizational change, allocating resources, and ensuring that educational goals are achieved.

Recent research has highlighted that school leadership extends beyond administrative responsibilities. Effective school leaders are expected to promote collaboration, support teachers' professional learning, and create environments that foster continuous improvement (Göçen & Döğer, 2025; Hauge et al., 2014). In addition, they must balance the expectations of students, teachers, parents, and policymakers while responding to changing educational policies and societal demands.

Decision-making is therefore a fundamental part of educational leadership. School leaders continuously interpret information, evaluate different alternatives, and make decisions that influence both everyday practice and long-term school development (Hauge et al., 2014; Leithwood et al., 2020). These decisions often involve balancing pedagogical priorities with organisational and administrative responsibilities.

School leadership is also characterised by a high degree of individual responsibility. Leithwood et al. (2020) explain that, although school leaders collaborate with teachers and leadership teams, they are ultimately responsible for many complex decisions concerning teaching, students, staff, and school development. This responsibility can make educational leadership a professionally demanding and, at times, relatively solitary role, requiring continuous reflection, judgement, and decision-making.

As schools become increasingly digitalised, educational leadership is also changing. School leaders are expected to understand and evaluate new digital technologies while ensuring that they contribute positively to teaching, learning, and school development (Reis-Andersson, 2024). This requires not only leadership competence but also growing levels of digital competence and critical judgement.

2.2 Artificial Intelligence in Educational Leadership

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing educational organisations and the work of school leaders (Chen et al., 2020; Fullan et al., 2024). While much of the research on AI in education has focused on teaching, learning, and students' use of AI, there is growing interest in how AI can support leadership practices. AI applications can assist school leaders in analysing data, planning activities, monitoring school performance, and reducing administrative workload (Chen et al., 2020).

One of the main advantages of AI is its ability to process large amounts of information quickly. School leaders often work with student achievement data, attendance records, staff information, quality reports, and other forms of documentation. AI can support this work by organising information, identifying patterns, and generating summaries that facilitate decision-making. Such support has the potential to make administrative processes more efficient and provide school leaders with more time to focus on pedagogical leadership, according to Dai et al. (2025).

AI may also contribute to more data-informed decision-making. By analysing available information and presenting relevant insights, AI can support leaders in identifying areas for school improvement and planning future actions. However, AI should be understood as a decision-support tool instead of a decision-maker. Responsibility for interpreting information, considering the local context, and making professional decisions remains with the school leader (Arar et al., 2025; Göçen & Döğer, 2025).

Despite these opportunities, researchers also emphasise several challenges associated with AI in educational leadership (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2024). These include concerns about transparency, bias, ethics, data privacy, and over-reliance on AI-generated recommendations. Consequently, school leaders require not only technical knowledge but also digital competence and critical judgement to evaluate AI-generated information and determine when and how AI should be used appropriately in professional practice.

2.3 AI as a Support for Educational Leadership

AI has the potential to support school leaders in several aspects of their professional practice. Adams and Thompson (2025) point out that, by processing large amounts of information, generating summaries, and identifying patterns in data, AI can reduce the time spent on routine administrative tasks. This may allow school leaders to devote more time to pedagogical leadership, teacher support, and school development. In this way, AI can function as a valuable decision-support tool rather than replacing professional decision-making (Göçen & Döğer, 2025).

Several studies also suggest that AI can strengthen data-informed decision-making by helping school leaders access and interpret information more efficiently. AI can provide additional insights that support planning, evaluation, and organisational development. Used appropriately, AI may therefore contribute to more informed and evidence-based decisions (Göçen & Döğer, 2025; Wang, 2021).

As AI becomes increasingly integrated into educational organisations, school leaders require new forms of professional competence to use AI effectively and responsibly (Fullan et al., 2024; Göçen & Döğer, 2025). This competence extends beyond technical skills and includes the ability to critically evaluate AI-generated information, understand AI's limitations, formulate effective prompts, and determine when AI can appropriately support professional practice.

At the same time, researchers emphasise that AI should not be viewed as an autonomous decision-maker. School leadership involves professional judgement, ethical considerations, communication, and relationships (Dai et al., 2025; Göçen & Döğer, 2025) that cannot be fully captured by AI-generated analyses. Consequently, school leaders need sufficient digital competence to evaluate AI-generated information critically and determine when AI can provide valuable support and when human judgement remains essential.

Although previous research has identified both opportunities and challenges associated with AI, there is still limited knowledge about how school leaders themselves perceive AI in their everyday professional practice. This study addresses that gap by exploring school leaders' own experiences and reflections on the role of AI in educational leadership.

3. Method

This section describes the research design, data collection, and data analysis. A qualitative research design was adopted to explore how school leaders perceive the impact of AI on their professional practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design (Cohen et al., 2017) to explore how school leaders perceive the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on their professional practice. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' experiences, reflections, and interpretations, and not measure predefined variables. Semi-structured interviews were therefore chosen to provide school leaders with the opportunity to describe their experiences of using AI in their everyday work and to reflect on its influence on educational leadership.

3.2 Participants and Data Collection

Three school leaders from Swedish primary schools (grades F-6) participated in the study. To ensure anonymity, they are referred to as SLA, SLB, and SLC. The interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interview format made it possible to explore common topics while also allowing participants to elaborate on their own experiences and reflections regarding AI in education leadership.

3.3 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated to identify meaningful segments related to the research questions. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories, which were reviewed and refined through an iterative process until coherent themes emerged. The analysis was conducted by the author. Throughout

the process, the developing themes were continuously compared with the interview data to ensure that they accurately reflected the participants' descriptions and experiences. The final analysis resulted in three themes.

4. Findings

The thematic analysis identified three overarching themes describing how school leaders perceive the role of AI in their professional practice. Together, these themes capture how AI is understood as a professional support tool, the continued importance of human judgement, and the competence required for responsible AI use. Table 1 presents an overview of the identified themes.

Table 1: Overview of the themes identified in the thematic analysis

Theme	Description
AI as a professional support tool	AI supports school leaders through administration, information management, data analysis, and reflective practice.
Human judgement remains essential	AI supports leadership decisions but does not replace professional judgement, ethical responsibility, or contextual understanding.
Competence for responsible AI use	Responsible AI use requires digital competence, critical evaluation, effective prompting skills, and an understanding of AI's possibilities and limitations.

4.1 AI as a Professional Support Tool

The findings show that all three school leaders primarily perceive AI as a professional support tool rather than a replacement for leadership. Across the interviews, AI was described as assisting with administrative work, organising information, analysing data, generating summaries, and supporting reflection. AI was viewed as helping school leaders prepare, structure, and better understand information before professional decisions were made.

For example, SLA described AI as particularly valuable when working with systematic quality assurance. By analysing large amounts of information, AI supported the identification of trends and helped structure data in ways that made further analysis more efficient. According to SLA, AI could "help gather and structure data" while providing a stronger basis for analysing school performance. At the same time, the participant emphasised that AI only provided support and never replaced the school leader's own judgement.

SLB described AI as an administrative support that helped prepare documents, draft communication, and organise information. Beyond these practical tasks, AI was also perceived as a reflective partner. SLB compared AI to "another participant in the leadership team," explaining that AI sometimes provided alternative perspectives that stimulated discussion and reflection within the leadership group.

SLC expressed similar experiences, highlighting AI as a practical tool that reduced the time spent on routine administrative tasks. AI was used to prepare presentations, summarise documents, and provide rapid access to information, thereby allowing more attention to be directed towards school leadership instead of administrative work. According to SLC, AI functioned primarily as a support that increased efficiency as opposed to replacing leadership activities.

Taken together, the findings suggest that school leaders perceive AI primarily as a professional support tool that strengthens administrative efficiency, facilitates access to information, and provides opportunities for reflection. AI is viewed as supporting school leaders in carrying out their professional responsibilities more effectively.

4.2 Human Judgement Remains Essential

Although the participants described AI as a valuable professional support tool, they consistently emphasised that AI cannot replace human judgement. Across all three interviews, the school leaders stressed that responsibility for decisions always remains with the school leader. AI was regarded as a tool that could provide information, generate suggestions, and support analysis, but never as a substitute for professional decision-making.

SLA explained that AI could produce analyses and suggest possible actions, but the final decision always had to be made by the school leader. According to SLA, "I would never ask AI to make a decision for me," emphasising

that AI should only provide decision support and not make decisions on behalf of leaders. The participant also highlighted the importance of carefully reviewing AI-generated information, explaining that the results must always be critically examined before being used as a basis for decision-making.

SLB described AI as a useful source of ideas and alternative perspectives but emphasised that professional responsibility could never be delegated to AI. AI could help organise information, draft documents, and suggest possible solutions, but leadership decisions required knowledge of the local context, professional experience, and human judgement. According to SLB, AI functioned as "a support" instead of "a replacement" for leadership.

SLC expressed similar views, particularly regarding decisions involving students, parents, and staff. The participant argued that educational leadership is too complex for AI to make decisions independently because many situations involve relationships, values, and contextual understanding that cannot easily be captured by AI systems. While AI could contribute to preparation and information gathering, the responsibility for interpreting information and making decisions always remained with the school leader.

Another recurring finding was the importance of critical evaluation. All three participants emphasised that AI-generated information should never be accepted uncritically. Instead, school leaders described a process of reviewing, verifying, and evaluating AI outputs before using them in their professional practice. Critical judgement was therefore considered an essential part of responsible AI use in educational leadership.

Overall, the findings indicate that school leaders perceive AI as a valuable source of support, while simultaneously maintaining that professional judgement, ethical responsibility, and contextual understanding remain fundamentally human responsibilities.

4.3 Competence for Responsible AI use

The third theme highlights that the meaningful use of AI depends on school leaders' competence. Across all three interviews, the participants emphasised that AI is not a tool that can simply be adopted without preparation. Instead, effective and responsible use requires knowledge, experience, and the ability to critically evaluate AI-generated information.

SLA explained that school leaders need several forms of competence to use AI effectively. These include understanding how AI works, learning how to formulate prompts, collecting appropriate data, evaluating AI-generated outputs, and recognising when AI should and should not be used. As SLA stated, "You need competence to understand AI, competence to collect the data, competence to prompt AI, competence to critically review, and competence to know when you should use AI."

SLB described competence as something that develops through practice. The participant emphasised the importance of experimenting with AI, learning from experience, and gradually becoming familiar with different AI tools. At the same time, SLB stressed that critical thinking must accompany this learning process, since AI may provide incorrect or misleading information if its outputs are not carefully reviewed.

Similarly, SLC explained that learning to use AI requires continuous exploration and practical experience. The participant argued that school leaders need to understand both the possibilities and the limitations of AI before integrating it into professional practice. According to SLC, using AI effectively involves knowing how to formulate appropriate questions, interpret AI-generated responses, and assess whether these responses are reasonable within the educational context.

Another important finding concerned the need for organisational support. The participants expressed a desire for more opportunities for professional learning, including training and competence development related to AI. They argued that school leaders need support not only to use AI themselves but also to guide teachers and contribute to responsible AI use across the school organisation.

Overall, the findings suggest that competence is a prerequisite for responsible AI use. AI requires school leaders to further develop their digital competence, critical judgement, and understanding of when AI can appropriately support professional practice.

5. Discussion

This study explored how school leaders perceive the impact of AI on their professional practice. Overall, school leaders viewed AI primarily as a professional support tool, not a replacement for leadership. Responsibility for leadership decisions remained with the school leader. AI was perceived as supporting educational leadership

while responsibility for professional decisions remained with the school leader. AI is becoming integrated into educational leadership, but its role is understood as supporting and not replacing professional practice.

The first research question asked how school leaders perceive the impact of AI on their professional practice. School leaders do not perceive AI as changing the nature of educational leadership itself. Instead, AI changes how leadership work is carried out. This allows school leaders to reduce the time spent on routine administrative tasks and devote more attention to pedagogical leadership.

This aligns with previous research suggesting that AI can strengthen data-informed leadership and improve administrative efficiency (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Dai et al., 2025; Wang, 2021). However, the study extends this knowledge by showing that school leaders themselves perceive AI primarily as a professional support tool. The participants viewed AI as supporting existing leadership practices by providing better access to information and improving preparation for professional decisions.

This study also contributes empirical insights to a growing field of research on AI in educational leadership. While previous studies have highlighted the potential of AI to support educational leadership (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2024; Göçen & Döğer, 2025), the findings provide new insights into how school leaders themselves perceive AI in their everyday professional practice. AI was viewed as a professional support tool that strengthens administrative work, reflection, and decision support. At the same time, school leaders consistently emphasised that the value of AI depends on professional judgement, critical evaluation, and digital competence.

AI was also described as a reflective partner. One participant compared AI to another participant in the leadership team, while another described AI as a tool for generating alternative perspectives before making decisions. AI may support reflective practice by broadening the range of perspectives considered during leadership processes. This aspect has received relatively limited attention in previous research and therefore represents an interesting area for future investigation.

The second research question examined the opportunities and challenges that school leaders associate with the use of AI in their professional practice. The participants identified several opportunities associated with AI. By reducing time spent on documentation, reporting, and information management, AI was perceived as creating greater opportunities for pedagogical leadership. The participants described it as a resource that could free time for activities that require human interaction and educational leadership.

At the same time, the findings also reveal important challenges. Across all three interviews, school leaders consistently emphasised that AI cannot replace professional judgement. Decisions concerning students, teachers, parents, and ethical issues were regarded as too context-dependent to be delegated to AI. Instead, AI was viewed as providing information and suggestions that require careful interpretation before decisions are made. These findings support previous research arguing that AI should be understood as a decision-support tool instead of an autonomous decision-maker (Arar et al., 2025; Göçen & Döğer, 2025).

Perhaps the most important challenge identified by the participants concerns the need to balance technological support with professional responsibility. The findings indicate that the opportunities offered by AI can only be realised when school leaders critically evaluate AI-generated information and determine when AI is appropriate to use. In this sense, the opportunities and challenges associated with AI should not be understood as separate dimensions but as closely interconnected aspects of responsible AI use.

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of professional competence. The participants described it as a combination of digital skills, critical thinking, professional judgement, and practical experience. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasising that successful AI integration depends not only on technological development but also on school leaders' professional competence and responsible AI use (Fullan et al., 2024; Göçen & Döğer, 2025). The challenge is therefore not only to introduce AI into schools but also to prepare school leaders to use AI responsibly. This has important implications for professional development, leadership education, and organisation support. Future competence development should focus not only on technical AI skills but also on ethical awareness, critical evaluation, and responsible decision-making.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on AI in educational leadership by providing empirical insights into how school leaders themselves perceive AI in their everyday professional practice. School leaders view AI as a professional support tool whose value depends on human judgement, critical evaluation, and professional competence. AI may support leadership, but responsibility for educational decisions continues to rest with the school leader.

5.1 Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications for educational leadership. First, AI should be viewed as a professional support tool and not a replacement for school leadership. It can support school leaders in organising information, analysing data, preparing documents, and promoting reflection, while responsibility for leadership decisions should remain with the school leader.

Second, school leaders need competence that extends beyond technical skills. Responsible AI use requires effective prompting, critical evaluation, and an understanding of AI's possibilities and limitations. Professional development should therefore combine AI literacy with ethical awareness and responsible leadership.

Finally, school organisations should provide structured opportunities for AI learning and competence development to support the responsible integration of AI into educational leadership.

5.2 Limitations

This study has some limitations. It is based on interviews with three school leaders from Swedish primary schools and therefore provides context-specific insights rather than statistically generalisable findings. The small number of participants also means that the findings should be understood as exploratory rather than representative of school leaders more broadly. The purpose of the study was to explore how school leaders perceive the role of AI in their professional practice rather than to generalise across educational contexts. In addition, the study relies on participants' self-reported experiences and not observations of AI use in practice. Despite these limitations, the study contributes empirical insights into an area that has received limited research attention by exploring how school leaders perceive and integrate AI into their professional practice.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how school leaders perceive the impact of AI on their professional practice. AI is increasingly becoming part of educational leadership, primarily as a professional support tool instead of a replacement for leadership. School leaders described AI as valuable for organising information, analysing data, preparing documents, and supporting reflection. These functions were perceived as contributing to greater administrative efficiency and creating more opportunities to focus on pedagogical leadership.

However, AI does not replace the professional responsibilities of school leaders. Decisions involving students, teachers, parents, and school development were consistently described as requiring professional judgement, ethical awareness, and contextual understanding. AI was therefore viewed as supporting decision-making and not making decisions. Across all three interviews, responsibility for educational leadership remained firmly with the school leader.

Another important conclusion concerns the role of competence. The participants emphasised that responsible AI use depends on more than technical knowledge. School leaders need to understand how AI works, critically evaluate AI-generated information, formulate effective prompts, and recognise both the possibilities and limitations of AI in different leadership situations. This highlights the importance of continuous professional learning as AI becomes increasingly integrated into educational practice.

Overall, this contributes empirical knowledge about how school leaders perceive AI in their everyday professional practice. As AI is replacing educational leadership, the findings suggest that AI strengthens leadership by supporting professional work while leaving responsibility, judgement, and decision-making in human hands.

6.1 Future Research

The study points to several directions for future research. First, further studies involving a larger number of school leaders from different educational contexts and school levels would provide a broader understanding of how AI is perceived and used in educational leadership. Comparative studies across municipalities or countries could also examine how organisational contexts influence the integration of AI into leadership practice.

Second, future research could move beyond self-reported experiences by combining interviews with observations, document analysis, or longitudinal designs. Such approaches would provide deeper insights into how AI is actually used in everyday leadership practice and how its role develops over time.

Finally, there is a need for further research on professional competence for responsible AI use in educational leadership. Future studies could explore how school leaders develop AI-related competence, how professional

learning supports responsible AI use, and how AI influences pedagogical leadership, decision-making, and organisational development over time.

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Generative AI Statement: Artificial intelligence tools, specifically ChatGPT, were used during the writing process of this paper to support language editing and improve clarity. All content and ideas remain the sole responsibility of the author(s).

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