

Critical Leadership to Overcome Organizational Inertia and Drive Innovation in High-Performance Organizations

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Abstract

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This study aims to explore leadership strategies to address the paradox of success in high-performing educational institutions, where past achievements often create strategic and cognitive inertia that hinders future adaptation. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, 48 recent articles (2021–2025) from reputable databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar were synthesized. The analysis reveals that inertia in high-performing organizations manifests as an invisible cage and status quo bias, preventing innovation and adaptation. The study identifies Critical Leadership as a key mechanism to overcome this inertia through executive curiosity, digital emancipation, and interim leadership. Furthermore, Maintenance Innovation is conceptualized as a dynamic capability carried out by agile teams, enabling organizations to adapt and innovate continuously. The contribution of this study lies in its systematic synthesis of research on critical leadership, organizational inertia, and maintenance innovation in educational settings, providing a unified framework for overcoming challenges in high-performing schools. The novelty of this research lies in redefining Maintenance Innovation as a dynamic process that sustains performance amid technological disruptions, in contrast to traditional views of innovation as routine. Additionally, the study introduces Critical Leadership as a transformative, disruptive force that shifts leadership roles from merely maintaining quality to fostering productive dissatisfaction to stimulate innovation. This research offers valuable insights for educational leaders and policymakers on how to manage change and innovation while maintaining quality. However, further empirical research using quantitative and mixed-methods approaches is needed to validate these findings and assess their application across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords:

*Critical Leadership,
Organizational Inertia,
Maintenance Innovation,
High-Performance Schools,
Systematic Literature Review*

Abstract.

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi strategi kepemimpinan dalam mengatasi paradoks keberhasilan di lembaga pendidikan berkinerja tinggi, di mana pencapaian masa lalu sering menciptakan inersia strategis dan kognitif yang menghambat adaptasi ke depan. Dengan menggunakan metodologi Systematic Literature Review (SLR), 48 artikel terbaru (2021–2025) dari database terkemuka seperti Scopus dan Google Scholar dianalisis. Hasil analisis mengungkapkan bahwa inersia di organisasi berkinerja tinggi terwujud dalam bentuk sangkar yang tidak terlihat dan bias status quo, yang menghambat inovasi dan adaptasi. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi Kepemimpinan Kritis sebagai mekanisme utama untuk mengatasi inersia ini melalui keingintahuan eksekutif, emansipasi digital, dan kepemimpinan sementara. Selain itu, Inovasi Pemeliharaan dikonseptualisasikan sebagai kemampuan dinamis yang dilaksanakan oleh tim yang tangkas, memungkinkan organisasi untuk terus beradaptasi dan berinovasi. Kontribusi dari

penelitian ini terletak pada sintesis sistematis penelitian tentang kepemimpinan kritis, inersia organisasi, dan inovasi pemeliharaan dalam konteks pendidikan, serta menyediakan kerangka kerja yang terpadu untuk mengatasi tantangan di sekolah berkinerja tinggi. Kebaharuan dari penelitian ini adalah dalam mendefinisikan Inovasi Pemeliharaan sebagai proses dinamis yang menjaga kinerja di tengah disrupsi teknologi, berbeda dengan pandangan tradisional yang menganggap inovasi sebagai kegiatan rutin. Penelitian ini juga memperkenalkan Kepemimpinan Kritis sebagai kekuatan transformatif yang menggeser peran pemimpin dari sekadar penjaga kualitas menjadi arsitek ketidakpuasan produktif untuk merangsang inovasi. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan berharga bagi pemimpin pendidikan dan pembuat kebijakan tentang bagaimana mengelola perubahan dan inovasi sambil mempertahankan kualitas. Namun, penelitian empiris lebih lanjut dengan pendekatan kuantitatif dan metode campuran diperlukan untuk memvalidasi temuan ini dan menguji penerapannya di berbagai konteks pendidikan.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of technological disruption and global uncertainty, high-performing organizations face a unique paradox. On the one hand, they are required to continue to maintain the standards of excellence that have been achieved; on the other hand, they must adapt to a high-speed environment that demands business model innovation and technological integration (K. Li et al., 2025; Sarangdhar et al., 2024). These demands include the need for digital literacy among younger generations. (Atias & Mawasi, 2025) and the coherence of adaptive professional development programs (Flamand et al., 2025). Ironically, however, the latest research in 2024 shows that the most successful organizations are actually the most vulnerable to strategic inertia (Perini et al., 2024). This phenomenon, known as the success paradox, occurs when past successes create invisible cages (*invisible cage*) in the form of rigid routines and status quo biases that hinder renewal (Kuzmanov, 2025; L. Wang et al., 2024).

In this context, traditional managerial leadership that focuses solely on stability is proving to be inadequate. A Critical Leadership approach is needed that is able to deconstruct these assumptions of the establishment (Bavlı & Özdemir, 2025; Learmonth & Morrell, 2017; Vu & Pham, 2025). Recent literature confirms that today's leaders must have the ability to lead in *E-Leadership* to manage hybrid teams (Bauwens & Cortellazzo, 2025) and perceived to have strong digital competence by its staff (Dasruth et al., 2024). Furthermore, leadership can no longer be singular; Shared leadership is needed (*Shared Leadership*) to mobilize the impact of innovation collectively (H. He & Hu, 2021) and the integration of various aspects of school leadership to create synergy (Kafa, 2025).

A key challenge for critical leaders in high-performing organizations is balancing the need to maintain quality (exploitation) with the need to foster radical innovation (exploration), a concept referred to in this study as maintenance innovation. Leaders must be able to facilitate group creativity by balancing divergent and convergent thinking. (Kartiko et al., 2025; Van Uum & Van Der Zanden, 2025) and building an organizational climate conducive to innovation (De Barros et al., 2025). The latest study also highlights the vital role of transformational leadership in navigating these digitalization challenges. (Kausar et al., 2025), as well as the importance of intellectual capital for agility (*Agility*), Education supply chain (Al-Omouh et al., 2022).

Despite the growing interest in organizational dynamics, research on leadership strategies to mitigate inertia remains fragmented across various domains, such as public service motivation (Hameduddin & Engbers, 2022) and general educational leadership (Toprak, 2020). Currently, there is a lack of a unified systematic synthesis bridging the concepts of strategic inertia, critical leadership, and maintenance innovation, which limits the development of comprehensive guidance for high-performing schools. To address this theoretical gap, this study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by four primary research questions: (1) How does the literature

characterize organizational inertia and the paradox of success in educational contexts? (2) What is the role of Critical Leadership in addressing competency traps? (3) How is Maintenance Innovation operationalized as an adaptation mechanism? and (4) What are the long-term implications of these strategies on institutional sustainability?.

METHODS

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to identify, evaluate, and interpret all relevant research evidence on the role of critical leadership in overcoming organizational inertia. This approach was chosen to minimize subjective bias and to provide a replicable synthesis of the paradox of success in educational institutions. The research protocol was prepared in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency and validity of the data selection process.

To ensure internal validity and substantive relevance of the analyzed literature, this study applied graded selection parameters by establishing strict inclusion and exclusion criteria (*Table 1*). Temporal boundaries were set for the period 2021 to 2025 to capture the dynamics of the management of superior schools specific to the era of technological disruption. With respect to publication type, the analysis was limited to peer-reviewed research articles. In contrast, secondary documents such as conference proceedings, book chapters, editorials, and review articles were excluded to maintain the data's empirical quality.

In addition, accessibility and language comprehension are key technical considerations; only full-text articles written in English or Indonesian are included in the review. Contextual criteria serve as the final filter of substance; the study focuses on the educational institution setting. Articles set in purely business organizations, technical sectors, or non-educational contexts that do not offer relevant theoretical implications for school management are automatically excluded from the research sample.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusions	Exclusion
Time Range	2021 – 2025	Published before 2021
Document Type	Research Article	Proceedings, Book Chapters, <i>Reviews</i> , Editorials, Opinions
Language	English & Indonesian	Languages other than English/Indonesian
Access	Open Access	Abstract Only (<i>No Full Text</i>)

Source: Data Collection, 2026

Publication Results and Data Screening

The literature search followed a source triangulation strategy, integrating a structured Scopus database query with a systematic Google Scholar search. To maintain consistency and transparency, the same set of Boolean operators and keywords was applied across both platforms: (“Critical Leadership” OR “Transformational Leadership”) and (“Organizational Inertia”) AND (“Maintenance Innovation”). In Google Scholar, the search was further refined using the Advanced Search feature to target these terms in the title or abstract.

To mitigate selection bias during the manual search, the researcher implemented a two-stage screening protocol based on pre-specified eligibility criteria. First, all identified records were screened for relevance by title and abstract. Second, the remaining articles underwent a full-text assessment to ensure they met the inclusion criteria (Table 1). This systematic filtering ensures that the selection was governed by the research protocol rather than subjective preference, maintaining the rigor of the SLR. Details of the search results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Literature Search Results by Keyword

Yes	Search Strings	Year	Database	Total Results
1	“Critical Leadership” OR	2021-2025	Scopus	572
2	“Transformational Leadership”) AND (“Organizational Inertia” OR “Competency Trap”) AND (“Maintenance Innovation” OR “Digital Transformation”).		Google Scholar	151
Total				723

Source: Data Collection, 2026

Articles that pass the initial screening stage are then assessed for eligibility through reading the full text. At this stage, the researcher applied advanced exclusion criteria to ensure data quality, excluding articles without full-text access, non-journal articles, and articles with language or methodology limitations from the sample. Based on a series of rigorous selection processes, several final (*included*) articles that meet all inclusion criteria are identified for further analysis in this systematic review. A detailed distribution of the number of articles at each stage is presented in Figure 1.

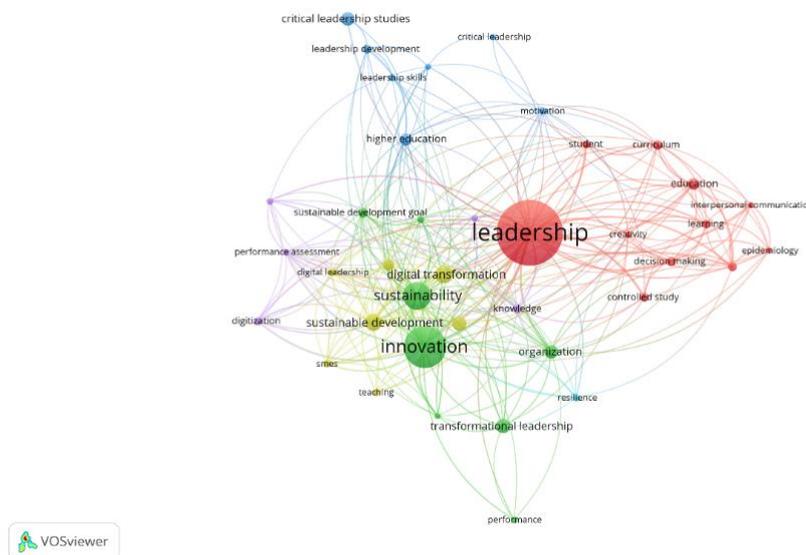


Figure 1. Distribution of Research Result by VOSviewer

PRISMA Analysis

PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) was used to conduct an in-depth analysis of the data collection process from 2 global databases: Google Scholar and Scopus. The detailed flow of the selection process is presented as follows:

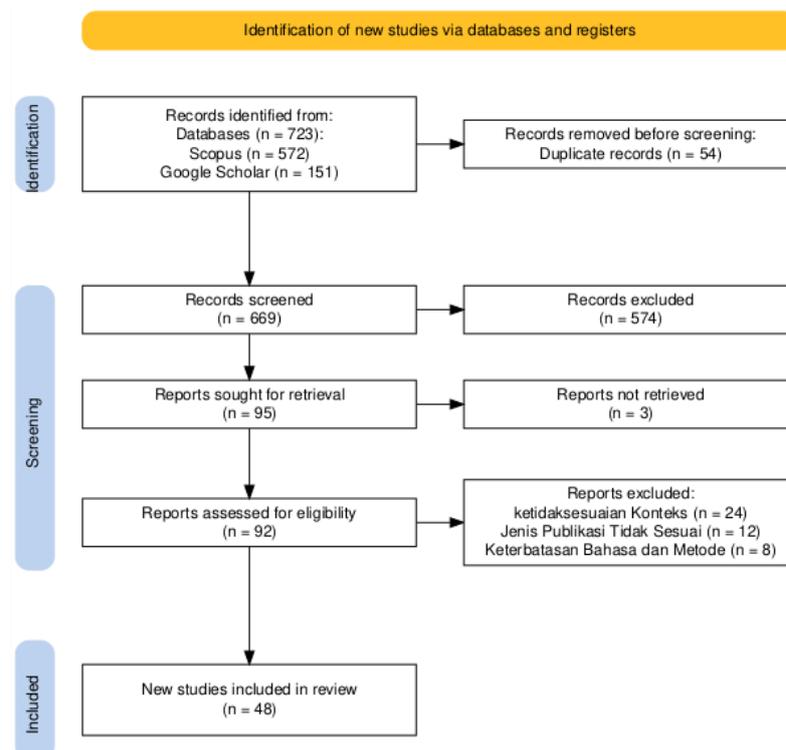


Figure 2. PRISMA Analysis Flowchart in Research

The article selection process is conducted in stages, as illustrated in the PRISMA 2020 flowchart (Figure 2). At the initial identification stage, the study collected a total of 723 documents, comprising 572 articles from the Scopus database and 151 from other sources (Google Scholar and manual searches). After duplicate checks using reference management software, 54 duplicate documents were removed, leaving 669 articles for *screening*.

The initial screening was conducted by reviewing the title and abstract, resulting in the exclusion of 574 articles. A total of 95 *reports were sought*; however, three were not *retrieved*. At the eligibility test stage, a total of 92 articles were evaluated in depth. Furthermore, the researcher excluded 44 other articles based on the exclusion criteria: (1) 24 articles due to context inconsistency (*context inconsistency*); (2) 12 articles due to inappropriate publication type (*inappropriate publication type*); and (3) 8 articles due to language and method limitations (*Language and Method Limitations*). As a result, 48 new studies were included in the review.

Based on the selection process, up to 48 articles were identified as final samples (studies included) that met all inclusion criteria for analysis in this systematic review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Characteristics of Inertia in High-Performance Organizations

Based on the PRISMA analysis process, the researcher classifies the findings based on four research questions: (1) How does the literature characterize the phenomenon of organizational inertia and the paradox of success, specifically in the context of high-performance educational institutions? (2) How does the practice of Critical Leadership play a role in deconstructing the *status quo* and addressing competency traps in established organizations? (3) How is the concept of Maintenance Innovation operationalized as an organizational adaptation

mechanism? Moreover, (4) What are the implications of the implementation of the strategy on the sustainability of the performance of educational institutions in the long term? Detailed findings are presented in the following subsections.

A synthesis of the selected articles reveals that the primary obstacle to innovation in high-performing organizations is not a lack of resources but rather a phenomenon the literature calls the *Paradox of Success*. These findings confirm that the mechanisms that created excellence in the past often mutate into barriers to future adaptation. Based on thematic analysis, this inertia is divided into three main dimensions: strategic inertia, cognitive inertia, and failure of technological adaptation.

First, Strategic Inertia: The Invisible Cage. The latest 2024 literature consistently portrays established organizations as trapped in a so-called. (L. Wang et al., 2024) As an invisible cage (*invisible cage*), this organization has experienced *Strategic Inertia*, in which it continues to repeat successful past routines (exploitation) and fails to innovate (exploration) despite a changing environment. (Perini et al., 2024). In the context of education, this manifests as the rigidity of program coherence: schools tend to maintain rigid curricular structures to preserve established quality standards, making it challenging to integrate new professional development models. (Flamand et al., 2025). As a result, dexterity (*Agility*) organizations decline drastically, making them slow to respond to external dynamics. (Al-Omouh et al., 2022).

Second, Cognitive Inertia: The psychology of self-satisfaction behind structural rigidity is a subtler yet deadly obstacle (Kuzmanov, 2025). It identifies *Status quo bias* as a dominant factor, whereby actors in the flagship school hold a collective belief that their approach is the best (Debarliev et al., 2020). Qualitative study titled *Change is always hard* (Edwards et al., 2023), reinforcing this by finding that the most significant resistance is not to the technicalities of change, but to the mentality of self-satisfaction (*Complacency*) (Bentley et al., 2023). This causes the diffusion of innovation to be uneven; Innovation is only adopted on the surface but rejected at the level of in-depth practice because it is perceived as interfering with convenience (Liu et al., 2023; Shin & Baek, 2023)

Third, Technological Inertia: The Failure of Digital Forecasting. A third dimension that stands out very prominently in the 2024-2025 literature is the inability to respond to environmental velocity (*High-velocity environments*) (Sarangdhar et al., 2024). Many institutions fail to recognize that new literacies, such as AI literacy, are not merely supplementary curricular components but fundamental needs. (Atias & Mawasi, 2025; Z. Li et al., 2025) Highlighting that without strategic digital integration in teacher development, schools will lose their relevance. This is exacerbated by the complex challenges of digitalization, in which schools often struggle to translate technology into effective leadership practices. (Kausar et al., 2025). This failure creates a gap between the potential of technology and pedagogical reality in the classroom. A summary of the literature on the characteristics of inertia is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Findings of Inertia Characteristics in High-Performance Organizations

Inertial Dimensions	Main Manifestations	Description of Findings in the Literature	Main References
Strategic	Invisible Cage & Competency Trap	Getting caught up in past successful routines that lead to structural rigidity and loss of agility.	(Al-Omouh et al., 2022; Flamand et al., 2025; Perini et al., 2024; L. Wang et al., 2024)

Cognitive	Status Quo Bias & Complacency	Collective mental resistance. The belief that the old methods were perfect led to an uneven diffusion of innovation.	(Bentley et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2023; Kuzmanov, 2025; Shin & Baek, 2023)
Technologist	Digital Lag & High-Velocity Blindness	Failure to respond to the pace of change in the digital environment (AI) and to adapt to new competencies.	(Atias & Mawasi, 2025; Bentley et al., 2023; Kausar et al., 2025; Z. Li et al., 2025; Sarangdhar et al., 2024)

Source: Data Collection, 2026

Critical Leadership Practices

To break the invisible cage (*inertia*) in high-performing organizations, the literature synthesis confirms that conventional managerial approaches are no longer adequate, underscoring the need for Critical Leadership interventions that operate in a transformative and disruptive manner. In contrast to transactional leaders, who tend to maintain system stability, the findings from the selected articles suggest that critical leaders act as catalysts of productive dissatisfaction, actively dismantling the comfort of the status quo. A fundamental step that critical leaders take is to deconstruct the narrative of past successes by cultivating curiosity. As emphasized by (Learmonth & Morrell, 2017; Odabaşı Çimer et al., 2025), leaders must dare to challenge the basic assumptions of an established organization. In the latest literature, this strategy is operationalized through Executive Curiosity (Perini et al., 2024; Y. Wang et al., 2023), where it is found that the curiosity of the leader (*Leader Curiosity*) is the direct antithesis of inertia. Leaders who keep asking critical questions like “*why*” and “*What if*” are able to stimulate innovative behaviour of staff and prevent competency traps, an approach that is also reinforced by the literature that highlights the importance of ethical awareness of not allowing outdated practices to persist in the name of tradition (Karim et al., 2025).

In the era of technological disruption, critical leadership is no longer a single heroic nature but rather manifests as *E-Leadership* that empowers. A cutting-edge study of 2025 highlights that critical leaders use technology not as a tool of control, but as an instrument of emancipation. Bauwens & Cortellazzo explain that today's leaders must be able to distribute authority through digital platforms, facilitating staff to become independent agents of change. (Bauwens & Cortellazzo, 2025). The findings support this. (Dasruth et al., 2024; Z. Li et al., 2025) which suggests that when principals are perceived as having strong digital competencies and actively empower teachers with AI literacy, resistance to change decreases dramatically. In the study, Kausar added that the digital transformation of education will succeed only if it is guided by a transformative vision that humanizes technology, ensuring that the adoption of new tools does not alter core pedagogical values. (Al-Husain et al., 2025; Kausar et al., 2025).

Interestingly, this synthesis also reveals the strategic role of fluid and transitional leadership structures in breaking inertia. A systematic review by Sturmberg & Martin found that Interim Leaders are often more effective at undertaking radical overhauls than definitive leaders. (Fisher et al., 2024), because they are not burdened by past emotional history or debt. The courage of these transition leaders in breaking down rigid structures paved the way for long-term innovation. In addition, modern organizational dynamics demand Shared Leadership (*Shared Leadership*), as suggested by (H. He & Hu, 2021) This distributes the burden of innovation across the team, so the organization is not paralyzed when a central figure leaves. External support

through *Executive Coaching* was also identified by (Chory et al., 2025) A crucial reinforcing factor for leaders in maintaining the consistency of their critical vision amid internal resistance.

Table 2. Findings of Critical Leadership Practices to Overcome Inertia

Intervention Strategies	Mechanism	Impact on Inertia	Main References
Deconstructing Narrative & Culture	Executive Curiosity: Replacing self-satisfaction with critical questions (Why are we doing this?). Ethical Challenge: Questioning the status quo based on fairness and values, not just tradition.	Break Cognitive Inertia (<i>Complacency</i>) and status quo bias by creating new psychological urgency.	(Karim et al., 2025; Learmonth & Morrell, 2017; Y. Wang et al., 2023)
Digital Emancipation	AI Empowerment: Facilitating teachers/staff with AI competencies to become independent innovators. Humanist Vision: Ensuring technology supports pedagogy, not replaces it.	Overcoming Technological Inertia. Transforming teacher resistance into active participation in digital transformation.	(Bauwens & Cortellazzo, 2025; Dasruth et al., 2024; Kausar et al., 2025; Z. Li et al., 2025)
Restructuring & Transition of Power	Interim Leadership: Using the transitional period/interim leader to carry out a radical “ <i>Cleansing</i> ” without the burden of history. Shared Leadership: Distribute the burden of innovation to the team.	Breaking the Strategic Inertia (Invisible Cage). Break the dependence on a single figure and rigid old procedures.	(Chory et al., 2025; Fisher et al., 2024; H. He & Hu, 2021; Scott, 2020)

Source: Data Collection, 2026

Operationalization of Maintenance Innovation

In addressing the third research question on operational mechanisms, the literature synthesis offers a radical reconceptualization of the term maintenance. In traditional management, maintenance is often viewed as a static activity aimed at preventing asset deterioration. However, in the context of high-performing organizations operating in high-speed environments, the literature confirms that Maintenance Innovation should be interpreted as a Dynamic Capability (*Dynamic Capabilities*). On literature (Perini et al., 2024; Sarangdhar et al., 2024) Explains that surviving organizations are not simply exploiting current advantages but also undertake strategic reforms (*Strategic Renewal*) to prevent obsolescence. This mechanism is *ambidextrous*: Schools maintain service quality standards (accreditation/core curriculum) while aggressively building absorption (*absorptive capacity*) against new knowledge from external (Bouguerra et al., 2022) What is the main prerequisite for innovation to be adopted? (Rogers, 2003).

Technically, Maintenance Innovation in the current era is operationalized through continuous digital transformation, not just the adoption of a momentary tool. The latest 2025 study on *Sustainable Digital Transformation* highlights that these innovations focus on creating new value (*Value Creation*) by integrating technology into core processes. (Hariyani et al., 2025). In

literature (X. Li et al., 2021) Mentioned that in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, organizational value is created through data connectivity. In practice, this translates into integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into teacher professional development and student literacy. (Atias & Mawasi, 2025; K. Li et al., 2025). This means that maintaining the performance of a superior school requires continually updating the HR management system and competencies using the latest technologies to ensure the institution's continued relevance to stakeholders. (Basri et al., 2024).

Furthermore, for this innovation not to end as a discourse, the diffusion mechanism must be social and agile. A systematic review shows that the effectiveness of innovation depends heavily on the formation of Agile Teams, cross-functional working groups that can adapt quickly without being hampered by rigid bureaucracy. (Steegeh et al., 2025). In addition, it was found that the diffusion of innovation within an organization is strongly influenced by the structure of social networks (*Signed networks*) (Mueller & Ramkumar, 2023). Maintenance Innovation spreads not through formal instruction, but through trust and collaboration between peers. Therefore, operationalizing this concept requires a shift from a rigid hierarchical structure to a fluid network structure, in which practice updates become an everyday culture rather than an annual project. A summary of the literature on the mechanism of Maintenance Innovation is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Findings of Maintenance Innovation Operational Mechanism

Innovation Dimension	Description of Findings in the Literature	Main References
Conceptual	Dynamic & Absorptive Capacity: The ability to absorb new ideas and balance exploitation (quality care) with exploration (new search).	(Bouguerra et al., 2022; Perini et al., 2024; Sarangdhar et al., 2024)
Technologist	Digital Value Integration: Using AI and technology not as a tool, but as a foundation for value creation.	(Atias & Mawasi, 2025; Hariyani et al., 2025; X. Li et al., 2021; Z. Li et al., 2025)
Structural	Agility & Networking: Using Agile Teams and internal social networks to diffuse innovation quickly and evenly.	(Mueller & Ramkumar, 2023; Steegh et al., 2025)

Source: Data Collection, 2026

Sustainability Through Adaptive Resilience and Emancipation

The final research question examines the long-term implications of applying critical leadership and maintenance innovations. A synthesis of literature refutes the traditional view that equates “*sustainability*” with “*Stability*”. On the contrary, the findings from the 48 selected articles confirm that, in the era of disruption, the sustainability of performance (Performance Sustainability) can be achieved only through adaptive resilience. A recent empirical study published in Nature Human Behaviour and Scientific Reports by Zhang provides statistical evidence that organizations that rigidly maintain old procedures have a higher failure rate under external shocks. (Y. Wang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). In contrast, organizations that lead with a data-driven, adaptive approach have significant advantages. (Edwards et al., 2023).

This discussion also highlighted the latent dangers of the so-called *Unsustainable Leadership* practices that pursue short-term score targets (such as test rankings) at the expense of teacher well-being and school resources. (Ly, 2025). In this context, a critical perspective is offered: the use of data in schools of excellence must be shifted from a mere objective of accountability (showing off achievements) to a goal of fairness (*equity*) (Datnow, 2017; Lee et al., 2025). Critical leaders use

data to identify students or teachers who are falling behind, ensuring that high school performance is inclusive rather than the result of systemic exclusion.(Curran et al., 2024).

According to the literature, a key mechanism for ensuring the sustainability of innovation is the democratization of agency. Innovations that depend on the instructions of influential people, in this case, the principal, will collapse when the leader leaves. Therefore, the importance of *Professional Learning Networks* (PLN) as a buffer for change (Bartels & Boche, 2024; Y. He et al., 2025).

Sustainability is created when innovation diffuses into teachers' social networks, becoming an independent collective culture. This is reinforced by the findings of Almassri (2024), who shows that effective agents of change are those who can translate a global vision into relevant local practices, making change an organic process from the bottom up (*Bottom Up*), not coercion from above. (N. Almassri, 2024). A summary of the literature on sustainability impacts is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Implications for Performance Sustainability

Sustainability Dimension	Key Findings	Main References
Adaptive Resilience	Resilient organizations are not the most stable (rigid) but rather the most adaptive to external data and shocks.	(Edwards et al., 2023; Y. Wang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025)
Sustainable Justice	The shift in the use of data from merely “ <i>Showing ff Ranking</i> ” (performativity) to a tool for ensuring justice and inclusion (<i>equity</i>).	(Curran et al., 2024; Datnow, 2017; Lee et al., 2025; Ly, 2025)
Institutionalization of Innovation	Innovation becomes sustainable only if it is distributed through teachers' social networks (Networks), rather than relying on a single leader.	(Bartels & Boche, 2024; Y. He et al., 2025; N. Almassri, 2024)

Source: Data Collection, 2026

DISCUSSION

The synthesis of literature in this study reveals that the phenomenon of inertia in high-performing organizations is not just a technical problem or a lack of resources, but an existential risk rooted in the so-called “success paradox. The findings regarding the characteristics of inertia deconstruct the myth that stability is an absolute indicator of organizational health. As identified, past successes often become invisible cages (*competency traps*), in which organizations are reluctant to abandon long-established practices that have proven successful even as their relevance fades. (Perini et al., 2024; Y. Wang et al., 2023). This inertia is exacerbated by status *quo* bias among staff who feel complacent, as well as by a strategic inability to anticipate the pace of technological change. (Debarliev et al., 2020; Kuzmanov, 2025; Sarangdhar et al., 2024). The implication is that schools of excellence that focus too much on exploiting old routines will lose sensitivity to external threats, experiencing fatal technological blindness in the era of artificial intelligence.

To overcome these structural and cognitive rigidities, traditional stability-oriented managerial approaches have proven inadequate and require transformative Critical Leadership interventions. Expanding on the theoretical framework of Learmonth & Morrell, this discussion highlights the shift in the leader's role from a mere standard-keeper to an architect of productive dissatisfaction. (McKee, 2022; Ryan et al., 2021). This is operationalized through the cultivation of executive curiosity (*Executive Curiosity*), where leaders actively challenge the organization's basic

assumptions to stimulate innovation. (Y. Wang et al., 2023). Furthermore, the findings regarding the effectiveness of Interim Leadership offer new insights: the termination of inertia often requires transitional figures who do not carry an emotional historical burden regarding the organization's past. (Fisher et al., 2024). In the digital context, critical leadership manifests as *E-Leadership* that empowers (Bauwens & Cortellazzo, 2025), where leaders distribute authority through technological literacy to teachers, turning resistance into active participation (Dasruth et al., 2024).

A synthesis of selected literature indicates a paradigm shift in understanding Maintenance Innovation. Rather than viewing it as the polar opposite of innovation, findings from various recent studies (Bouguerra et al., 2022) point to this concept as a manifestation of Dynamic Capabilities. From this perspective, high-performing schools are identified as maintaining quality by continuously updating the organization's capacity to absorb new knowledge. This mechanism requires a structural shift from vertical bureaucracy to agile teams capable of adapting quickly without being hampered by rigid procedures (Steegh et al., 2025). The diffusion of innovation in this model occurs organically through teachers' social networks (Mueller & Ramkumar, 2023), ensuring that innovation becomes a daily collective culture, rather than merely an incidental project from superiors.

This synthesis offers crucial novelty by deconstructing traditional biases in school management literature that often contrast stability and change in a binary manner. Unlike previous studies, which tend to be fragmented or overly focused on the narrative of the heroic leader as the sole solution, the framework proposed in this study is integrative and multi-perspective (Franco & Landini, 2022). By positioning Maintenance Innovation as a systemic mechanism rather than simply a personal attribute of the leader, this research minimizes subjective interpretation bias and provides a more objective theoretical foundation for understanding how leading schools can remain relevant without losing their institutional identity.

The long-term implications of this leadership model and the identified innovation mechanisms lead to sustainable performance grounded in resilience. Recent empirical evidence from the journal *Nature* supports this argument by showing that organizations led through an adaptive approach have significantly higher levels of resilience than those managed rigidly (Xi et al., 2025). However, the literature also emphasizes that such sustainability is not achieved through the pursuit of accountability scores alone, but rather through data equity (Datnow, 2017; Ryan et al., 2021). When critical leaders democratize innovation and ensure technological inclusivity, they effectively build a resilient organizational immune system, prevent schools from becoming stagnant, and ensure the education ecosystem continues to evolve with the demands of the times.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully addresses the research focus by exploring how organizational inertia impacts high-performing educational institutions and the role of Critical Leadership in overcoming it. The research reveals that organizational inertia, manifesting as strategic, cognitive, and technological inertia, often stems from the paradox of success, in which past achievements lead to complacency that hinders future adaptation. Critical Leadership plays a pivotal role in breaking this inertia through strategies such as executive curiosity, digital emancipation, and interim leadership. Additionally, the concept of Maintenance Innovation is reframed not as a routine activity but as a dynamic capability that agile teams can implement to ensure institutional sustainability and adapt to technological disruptions. The study highlights that leaders in high-

performing schools must move beyond merely maintaining standards and embrace a more disruptive approach to lead innovation and adaptation.

Despite the significant contributions of this study, there are limitations that warrant addressing in future research. Firstly, the study relies on a systematic literature review, which, while comprehensive, does not include empirical validation of the proposed models in real-world educational settings. Future studies should incorporate quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to test the effectiveness of Critical Leadership and Maintenance Innovation in practice. Additionally, the research is limited by its focus on literature primarily from 2021–2025, and further exploration across diverse educational contexts and cultures would provide a more holistic understanding of these concepts. It is recommended that future research focus on longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of Critical Leadership on organizational resilience and adaptability, and to investigate the practical implementation of agile teams and digital transformation in schools.

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