



Facilitators of Organizational Ambidexterity in Schools: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

Abstract: This qualitative study examines the facilitators of organizational ambidexterity in schools. While the concept has been widely studied in corporate and higher education settings, its application to primary and secondary schools is limited. Using thematic analysis, this study examines why organizational ambidexterity is necessary in schools. Fifteen participants, including executive and academic experts, were purposively selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focusing on the causal conditions and necessities for organizational ambidexterity in schools. Transcripts were inductively coded using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework. Four main themes emerged: (1) leadership orientation, highlighting the role of visionary and transformational leadership in fostering dual strategies. (2) structural and policy flexibility, emphasizing decentralized decision-making, adaptive resource allocation, and flexible scheduling. (3) cultural openness and psychological safety, where feedback, risk-taking, and empowerment supported exploratory behaviors. and (4) strategic alignment and communication enabled coherence through shared vision and stakeholder engagement. Findings suggest that ambivalence in schools is shaped not only by structural conditions but also by leadership sense, trust-based cultures, and relationship dynamics. This study contributes to the educational leadership literature by providing a nuanced framework for fostering ambivalence capacity in complex school environments.

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Introduction

Contemporary schools function within volatile and multidimensional ecosystems shaped by globalization, technological acceleration, and shifting socio-political agendas. These forces have created unprecedented demands for both operational stability—ensuring standardized curriculum delivery, assessment integrity, and accountability—and adaptive innovation, such as integrating artificial intelligence, personalized learning, and competency-based approaches (Mesra et al., 2024; Cahapay, 2020; Ghanizadeh et al., 2023).

In recent years, this dual requirement has intensified as schools navigate post-pandemic recovery, digital transformation, and sustainability-oriented educational reform agendas that call for innovation within constrained governance systems (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Chen et al., 2025).

This context exemplifies what organizational theorists describe as a strategic paradox—the simultaneous pursuit of exploration and exploitation (Papachroni et al., 2020). In educational terms, exploitation involves improving existing systems through standardized instruction and procedural reliability, whereas exploration refers to experimentation, creativity, and strategic renewal (Rosing & Zacher, 2023). Modern schools must therefore operate as ambidextrous organizations capable of sustaining traditional performance while embracing emergent pedagogical and technological practices (Hedayatirad et al., 2025; Alkhamees & Durugbo, 2024).

Organizational ambidexterity, originating in strategic management theory, is increasingly recognized as a core capability for complex educational systems (Zimmermann et al., 2017). It reflects the capacity of schools to balance continuity and change, preserving their institutional identity while dynamically adapting to policy reform, digitalization, and social diversity. Recent research emphasizes that ambidexterity in education depends on the integration of leadership cognition, institutional design, and cultural adaptability rather than isolated managerial actions (Popadiuk et al, 2018; Xi et al., 2025).

However, empirical work on how schools achieve such balance remains limited. Most ambidexterity studies focus on universities and corporate contexts where autonomy and resource flexibility are higher (Kazem & Salman, 2024). Educational institutions, by contrast, face hierarchical governance, rigid curricula, and policy-driven accountability systems that

constrain adaptive decision-making (Puican et al, 2023; Hashemi et al, 2023). The scarcity of research on how schools manage these constraints highlights a critical gap in understanding the mechanisms and conditions enabling ambidextrous performance.

To address this gap, the present study explores the fundamental necessities and causal conditions that support or inhibit ambidexterity in schools, drawing on the lived experiences of educational leaders and experts. It seeks to identify how leadership orientation, organizational structure, culture, and communication intersect to foster balanced innovation. This qualitative inquiry adopts Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis to systematically interpret participants' narratives and uncover latent patterns that explain how schools enact, sustain, or limit ambidextrous capabilities.

By situating ambidexterity within the specific realities of primary and secondary education, this study contributes to both theory and practice—offering insights that can inform leadership preparation, policy reform, and organizational learning strategies aimed at enhancing schools' adaptive capacity in the face of uncertainty.

Theoretical Foundations

Organizational ambidexterity has emerged as a central construct in organizational and educational research, capturing the ability of institutions to engage in both exploitation—refining and improving existing systems—and exploration—experimenting and innovating for future viability (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). In the educational context, ambidexterity refers to schools' capacity to maintain instructional consistency, accountability, and procedural reliability while simultaneously fostering pedagogical innovation, teacher collaboration, and technological adaptation (Nadeem, 2024; Alkhamees & Durugbo., 2024).

Recent studies emphasize that this duality is not a binary trade-off but a dynamic equilibrium sustained through leadership cognition, cultural learning mechanisms, and adaptive organizational design (Xi et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025).

The following sections elaborate on the theoretical underpinnings of ambidexterity and its relevance to educational systems, organized into five interrelated domains: (1) foundational theories of ambidexterity, (2) ambidexterity in educational organizations, (3) leadership and sensemaking, (4) organizational culture and structure, and (5) a synthesized conceptual framework.

1. Foundational Theories of Organizational Ambidexterity

The concept of ambidexterity originates in organizational theory, particularly the works of O'Reilly & Tushman (2013), who introduced the distinction between exploitation and exploration. Exploitation involves efficiency, refinement, and implementation, whereas exploration entails experimentation, flexibility, and innovation.

Subsequent research has identified three primary theoretical approaches: structural, contextual, and dynamic perspectives.

The structural perspective posits that organizations achieve ambidexterity by establishing separate subunits for exploration and exploitation. Each unit operates under distinct strategies, processes, and cultures, but remains integrated at the senior leadership level (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). In schools, this might translate into divisions where one team focuses on digital learning initiatives while another ensures curricular compliance and assessment standards.

The contextual perspective (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004) suggests that ambidexterity is achieved when individuals are empowered to balance their daily activities between innovation and efficiency. This view emphasizes behavioral flexibility and organizational climate over structural differentiation. Recent research has extended this view, highlighting how digital technologies and distributed leadership structures can create "adaptive spaces" where educators co-develop innovations while maintaining systemic coherence (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; De et al., 2020).

The dynamic capability perspective integrates the previous two by viewing ambidexterity as an evolving process of sensing opportunities, seizing innovations, and reconfiguring resources (Teece et al., 2016). This approach is particularly relevant to schools, where contextual changes such as policy reforms, demographic shifts, and technological advancements require continual reconfiguration of teaching and management practices (Zimmermann et al., 2017; Hedayatirad et al., 2025).

2. Ambidexterity in Educational Organizations

Educational institutions are complex adaptive systems, characterized by multiple stakeholders, layered accountability, and competing goals (Fullan, 2020). These systems demand both stability—necessary for delivering equitable and standardized

education—and flexibility—to respond to emerging needs and technologies.

In this regard, ambidexterity provides a theoretical lens to understand how schools can innovate without losing institutional integrity (Xi et al., 2025).

Unlike corporate organizations, schools function under strict external constraints such as centralized curricula, government regulations, and limited budgets. These conditions make traditional models of structural ambidexterity difficult to implement.

Therefore, contextual ambidexterity, driven by leadership behaviors, teacher agency, and cultural adaptability, becomes the most feasible path for educational systems (Puican et al, 2023; Hashemi et al , 2023).

Empirical studies suggest that schools demonstrating ambidextrous behavior exhibit several key characteristics: (a) distributed leadership and shared decision-making, (b) learning-oriented cultures where experimentation is encouraged, and (c) alignment between institutional strategy and classroom practice (Ng & Chua, 2023; Nadeem, 2024).

Such schools create "dual structures" that support both ongoing instructional delivery and innovation projects—for instance, maintaining standardized testing protocols while experimenting with project-based learning or digital pedagogies.

Recent frameworks, such as digital ambidexterity (Guo et al., 2025), further highlight the necessity for educational institutions to combine technological integration with pedagogical transformation. In this sense, ambidexterity is not only organizational but cognitive and digital, requiring educators to navigate between analog traditions and emerging technological ecosystems.

3. Leadership, Sensemaking, and Adaptive Capacity

Leadership plays a decisive role in fostering ambidexterity. Visionary and transformational leaders interpret paradoxes not as contradictions but as opportunities for synthesis (Leithwood et al., 2019; Gumus et al., 2018).

Leaders who articulate a compelling vision provide direction for exploration while stabilizing the organization's core identity.

Contemporary leadership theories, such as complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) and adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2023), propose that

effective leaders in turbulent environments act as “catalysts of emergence,” enabling distributed problem-solving and promoting reflective learning among staff.

In schools, ambidextrous leadership manifests through three interrelated dimensions:

1. Visionary Cognition – the capacity to anticipate systemic change and position the school accordingly (Kazem & Salman, 2024);
2. Relational Trust and Collaboration – building safe environments where staff can take calculated risks (Guo et al., 2025);
3. Distributed Agency – empowering teachers as co-leaders who balance compliance with creativity (De et al., 2020).

Studies conducted in 2024 and 2025 demonstrate that ambidextrous leadership in education correlates strongly with teacher innovation, digital adoption, and school adaptability (Xi et al., 2025; Popadiuk et al., 2018). Leaders who foster cross-functional communication and reflection mechanisms are more successful in maintaining this balance.

4. Organizational Culture, Structure, and Learning

Organizational culture serves as the connective tissue that binds structural mechanisms with individual actions. Psychological safety, collective efficacy, and openness to feedback are crucial for cultivating a learning culture (Schein, 2010).

Recent research identifies that schools with high ambidexterity maturity demonstrate cultural patterns emphasizing collaboration, failure tolerance, and shared accountability (Schechter & Qadach, 2019; Wang et al., 2020).

Culturally ambidextrous schools institutionalize continuous professional learning through feedback loops, reflective inquiry, and peer coaching. Such mechanisms convert individual learning into organizational knowledge.

Structurally, these schools balance formal hierarchies with informal networks, creating flexibility without chaos.

Emerging studies highlight the importance of “structural modularity,” allowing schools to create temporary innovation teams or pilot programs that operate semi-independently but align with institutional goals (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Alkhamees & Durugbo., 2024).

Moreover, knowledge management and data-driven decision-making have become central to maintaining ambidextrous capacity in educational organizations (Anam & Hafiz, 2025). By using digital analytics and evidence-based planning, schools can identify what innovations to scale and what practices to refine.

5. Toward a Conceptual Framework for Ambidexterity in Schools

Synthesizing these theoretical insights, the study proposes a multilevel conceptual framework in which organizational ambidexterity emerges from the interaction among leadership orientation, structural flexibility, cultural openness, and strategic alignment.

At the individual level, teacher agency and professional judgment mediate the balance between innovation and compliance. At the organizational level, leadership vision, distributed authority, and learning culture form the enabling conditions for adaptive behavior. Finally, at the systemic level, policy alignment and stakeholder collaboration provide the broader environment for ambidexterity to flourish (Fullan, 2020; Aldridge & McLure, 2023).

This integrative framework conceptualizes ambidexterity as a dynamic capability—an ongoing process rather than a static trait—where exploration and exploitation continuously interact through feedback, communication, and collective sensemaking (Xi et al., 2025; Kazem & Salman, 2024).

In sum, the theoretical foundation underscores that schools capable of thriving in uncertainty are those that balance innovation and stability through adaptive leadership, cultural trust, structural modularity, and coherent strategy. This conceptual lens provides the scaffolding for the empirical phases of the current research, guiding the identification of causal conditions and mechanisms that enable ambidextrous capacity in educational settings.

Research Background

Organizational ambidexterity has become a prominent area of inquiry across management, innovation, and educational leadership research. It reflects the capacity of organizations to balance two competing imperatives: exploitation, referring to refinement and optimization of existing practices, and exploration, which denotes experimentation and innovation for future development (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Despite its extensive study in business and corporate environments, ambidexterity

remains relatively underexplored in the field of K–12 education. The following review provides a systematic and analytical overview of previous research, organized around four main themes: (1) theoretical and empirical developments in organizational ambidexterity, (2) ambidexterity in higher education, (3) emergent studies in school contexts, and (4) identified gaps and research needs that justify the present study.

The foundational studies on ambidexterity emerged from organizational theory and strategic management. March's distinction between exploitation and exploration inspired decades of research into how firms sustain innovation without jeopardizing efficiency. O'Reilly and Tushman (2013) formalized the notion of ambidextrous organizations, arguing that organizations can survive environmental turbulence only when they simultaneously pursue both stability and renewal.

Subsequent empirical research across industries has emphasized the multi-dimensional nature of ambidexterity, incorporating structural, contextual, and dynamic perspectives (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Teece et al., 2016). Recent meta-analyses (Zimmermann et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2025) confirm that ambidexterity is not merely a static capability but a dynamic process shaped by leadership cognition, resource flexibility, and cultural adaptation.

Organizations that develop ambidextrous capacity display a form of strategic agility, allowing them to adapt without losing coherence (Lewis et al., 2020).

Emerging scholarship in 2024–2025 has expanded the theory into domains such as digital ambidexterity and public sector innovation (Kazem & Salman, 2024; Popadiuk et al., 2018). These studies highlight that leaders' cognitive complexity and sensemaking capabilities play a decisive role in balancing competing demands. This insight directly informs research in educational settings, where leaders must reconcile accountability systems with innovation imperatives.

Research on ambidexterity in higher education institutions (HEIs) provides valuable conceptual foundations for applying the construct in schools. Universities are expected to perform dual missions—preserving academic rigor while fostering research innovation—making them natural sites for ambidexterity studies.

Kazem & Salman (2024) conceptualized ambidextrous leadership in universities as the integration of strategic foresight, participative management, and innovation-oriented culture.

Similarly, Kazem & Salman, (2024) demonstrated that higher education leaders who combine exploratory digital transformation with exploitative administrative stability achieve more sustainable institutional outcomes.

Empirical studies also reveal that ambidextrous universities rely on distributed decision-making and cross-functional collaboration. For instance, Chai et al. (2025) found that academic institutions adopting shared governance models were more adaptable to technological change and capable of integrating innovation without undermining accountability structures.

However, these insights cannot be directly generalized to educational systems, where bureaucratic constraints, standardized curricula, and limited autonomy impose additional barriers to ambidexterity (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017). The contextual differences between universities and schools highlight the need for domain-specific investigation.

Although limited, the number of studies examining ambidexterity in schools has been gradually increasing since 2020. Early explorations focused on leadership behaviors and cultural conditions conducive to innovation.

Purwanto et al. (2024) found that principals who employed transformational and distributed leadership practices created environments where teachers felt empowered to experiment with new instructional approaches. Similarly, Zhang (2025) emphasized the role of enabling school structures—such as team-based collaboration and professional autonomy—in supporting ambidextrous behavior among educators.

More recent research has expanded the construct by linking ambidexterity to digital transformation, adaptive governance, and post-pandemic educational reform (Cahapay, 2020; Hedayatirad et al., 2025; Kazem & Salman, 2024).

These studies consistently identify four enabling conditions: (1) leadership flexibility, (2) structural and policy adaptability, (3) cultural openness, and (4) strategic alignment.

Xi et al. (2025) analyzed hybrid schools that integrate online and offline learning environments and concluded that leadership cognition and teacher collaboration are critical for maintaining organizational equilibrium between exploration and exploitation. Eriksson and Björk (2023) similarly found that schools that developed reflective and participatory leadership were better equipped to

manage the paradox between innovation and accountability during educational reforms.

Hashemi et al (2023) introduced the concept of educational ambidexterity, emphasizing that innovation should be balanced with system coherence, not pursued as disruption. They argued that schools succeed when they combine local experimentation with alignment to policy goals—a notion central to adaptive educational governance.

Another emerging line of inquiry focuses on the role of trust and psychological safety. Schechter and Qadach (2019) demonstrated that cultures fostering open communication and collective learning enhance teachers' willingness to take risks. Likewise, Wang et al. (2020) found that positive classroom and staff climates contribute to higher levels of institutional adaptability.

These findings underscore that ambidexterity is not only structural but deeply social and relational, embedded in daily interactions and shared meanings.

The literature from 2024–2025 demonstrates a significant evolution in how scholars conceptualize ambidexterity. Instead of viewing it solely as a leadership or structural phenomenon, researchers now approach it through systems thinking and complexity theory (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Heifetz et al., 2023).

New empirical evidence suggests that ambidexterity in educational organizations emerges through iterative learning cycles, collective sensemaking, and digital integration (Anam & Hafiz, 2025; Guo et al., 2025).

For example, Xi et al. (2025) found that digitally ambidextrous schools leverage data analytics to refine instruction (exploitation) while simultaneously developing innovative pedagogies (exploration). Similarly, Guo et al. (2025) identified that combining digital tools with transformational leadership strengthens teachers' adaptive capabilities.

These insights highlight that technological and cognitive ambidexterity are intertwined dimensions of organizational learning.

Cross-national comparative studies also provide valuable perspectives.

Popadiuk et al (2018) examined leadership cognition in Scandinavian public schools and found that cognitive ambidexterity—the ability of leaders to integrate analytical and creative thinking—significantly predicted organizational adaptability.

Meanwhile, Hedayatirad et al. (2025) explored Iranian schools and identified that resource constraints, hierarchical governance, and policy centralization create tension between innovation and conformity. They concluded that trust-based leadership and collaborative culture mitigate these tensions, reinforcing the central role of relational dynamics in educational ambidexterity.

In sum, the emerging consensus across studies from 2024 and 2025 is that ambidexterity in education is a multi-level, context-dependent capability requiring alignment among leadership, structure, culture, and strategy.

Despite this growing body of work, several research gaps remain.

First, most existing studies focus on universities or private schools, with very limited empirical research in public educational systems. These contexts differ significantly in terms of governance, accountability, and teacher autonomy, making it essential to explore how ambidexterity operates under public-sector constraints (Kazem & Salman, 2024; Puican et al, 2023).

Second, the majority of prior research adopts quantitative or conceptual designs, leaving a shortage of in-depth qualitative evidence that captures how ambidexterity is enacted in everyday school practices. Recent reviews (Zimmermann et al., 2017; Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017) call for qualitative inquiry that illuminates the micro-processes—such as dialogue, reflection, and decision-making—through which schools balance competing priorities.

Third, there remains a lack of contextual diversity in the literature. Most ambidexterity studies are concentrated in Western educational systems, with limited representation from emerging contexts in Asia and the Middle East (Hedayatirad et al., 2025). Understanding how cultural and policy environments influence ambidextrous practices can broaden theoretical generalizability.

Finally, conceptual integration across studies is still weak. While leadership, structure, and culture are widely discussed, few studies offer a comprehensive model connecting these dimensions.

This study addresses these gaps by developing a contextually grounded conceptual framework for ambidexterity in schools, emphasizing leadership orientation, structural and policy flexibility, cultural openness, and strategic alignment.

By using a qualitative thematic approach, it seeks to uncover how these dimensions interact to enable or hinder dual-capacity development. The findings are expected to contribute both to theory—by refining the concept of educational ambidexterity—and to practice, by guiding leadership and policy strategies that promote balanced innovation.

Material and Methods

This research was conducted with a qualitative approach and thematic analysis method. Thus, in order to identify the facilitators of organizational ambidexterity in schools, participants were initially selected during 2023 and 2024 based on the study entry criteria, and interview questions were designed based on theoretical foundations and validated by 4 experts. The interviews continued until data saturation was reached. The data from each interview were analyzed and coded, and themes were extracted from the initial codes.

The sampling method was purposive in terms of intensity and selection of salient cases. Accordingly, 15 experts were selected based on the study entry criteria. The sample selection criteria among executive and academic experts include: having at least 5 years of experience in school or education district management, willingness to participate in qualitative interviews, expertise in educational management and similar academic fields, membership in university faculty, membership in the provincial or provincial education council, and having at least a master's degree.

6 of the participants worked in the Education Organization of East Azerbaijan Province, 4 worked in universities of East Azerbaijan Province, 5 worked in both education departments or schools and universities. All participants lived in East Azerbaijan Province. 12 of the participants had a PhD and 2 of them had a master's degree, 1 of the participants was a PhD student. All participants had more than 20 years of work experience.

In order to extract the facilitators of organizational ambidexterity in schools, 15 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 15 participants. The purpose of such interviews was to collect the participants' scientific and empirical views on successful experiences in organizational ambidexterity in education, and the interview questions, based on its objectives, included questions on the causal conditions and necessities of organizational ambidexterity in schools, and scientific views on it. The interviews lasted from 35 to 70

minutes, with an average interview duration of 44 minutes. Interviews continued until data saturation, that is, until no new opinions were found from individuals with an increase in the number of interviews. Prior coordination was made to avoid wasting participants' time, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase model of thematic analysis (2006; 2021). This approach involves a recursive, reflexive process of moving back and forth between data and interpretation, rather than a linear progression. Below is a detailed description of each phase as applied in this study.

Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data

The researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading interview transcripts, noting early ideas and recurring expressions. Reflexive memoing was used to capture initial impressions about leadership tensions and innovation practices.

For instance, repeated references to “balancing change with consistency” and “maintaining standards under pressure” indicated a latent pattern of ambidextrous thinking among school leaders.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Initial coding was conducted inductively, focusing on meaningful segments of text that represented participants' experiences. Codes were descriptive at first and progressively refined into conceptual categories.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Codes were then collated into potential themes and subthemes by identifying conceptual similarities. This involved clustering codes that represented broader patterns of meaning related to ambidextrous functioning in schools.

Four primary candidate themes emerged:

1. Leadership Orientation
2. Structural and Policy Flexibility
3. Cultural Openness and Psychological Safety
4. Strategic Alignment and Communication

Each theme contained subthemes derived from recurrent patterns, such as “visionary thinking,” “adaptive resource allocation,” and “stakeholder involvement”.

This phase required iterative discussions among researchers to ensure conceptual coherence and alignment with the study objectives.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

Themes were reviewed in two stages. First, they were checked against the coded extracts to verify internal consistency. Second, they were compared with the entire dataset to ensure representativeness. Several candidate themes were refined, merged, or discarded.

For example, two initial themes—‘teacher empowerment’ and ‘psychological safety’—were integrated into a broader theme of ‘Cultural Openness and Psychological Safety,’ capturing the relational dimension of ambidexterity.

At this point, thematic saturation was reached, meaning no new themes emerged from the data.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

In this phase, each theme was clearly defined to capture its essence and contribution to the overall research question. The process involved writing detailed analytical summaries and identifying the central organizing concept of each theme.

An illustrative example from the data:

“We are encouraged to experiment with new digital tools, but our principal always reminds us to link them to curriculum goals. It’s not innovation for innovation’s sake—it’s purposeful.” (Participant 7)

This quotation exemplifies the intersection of visionary leadership and strategic alignment, reinforcing the dynamic interplay of exploration and exploitation.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final stage involved synthesizing thematic findings into a coherent narrative supported by direct quotations and interpretive commentary. The themes were mapped visually in a thematic network diagram, showing causal relationships between enabling conditions and ambidextrous capacity.

To ensure analytic transparency, an audit trail of coding decisions, theme revisions, and memos was maintained throughout the process. This model was chosen for its suitability in exploring participants’ lived experiences and the contextual complexity of ambidexterity in educational settings.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure an accurate and nuanced representation of

participant narratives. Initial coding was conducted inductively, meaning that codes were data-driven rather than theory-imposed, allowing for the emergence of latent meanings and patterns (Saldaña, 2021). During the coding process, segments of text were examined for repeated ideas, tensions, and conceptual relationships related to the central focus of the study—namely, the organizational conditions that enable ambidexterity in schools.

Subsequently, the codes were grouped into thematic clusters representing higher-order concepts. These were further refined into major themes and subthemes, allowing for the identification of complex dynamics such as leadership adaptability, structural tensions, innovation constraints, and role negotiation. Throughout the analysis, iterative reading and cross-checking of themes ensured coherence and internal consistency, as recommended in qualitative rigor literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were implemented, consistent with Lincoln and Guba’s criteria for qualitative rigor: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Sarghini et al, 2023). Credibility was established through triangulation and member checking. Triangulation involved comparing responses across diverse stakeholder groups (e.g., principals, coordinators, consultants), which allowed for convergence of findings and increased interpretive validity. In member checking, preliminary findings and thematic interpretations were shared with selected participants to ensure that their perspectives had been accurately represented and interpreted. Dependability was reinforced by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting each step of the research process, including decision-making in coding, theme development, and analytical reflections. This process enhances transparency and allows others to assess the logic and consistency of the research process. Confirmability was addressed through reflective memoing, in which the researcher maintained analytic memos throughout the data collection and analysis stages. These memos captured evolving interpretations, potential biases, and theoretical insights, helping to bracket researcher subjectivity and support neutral analysis. Although transferability is context-specific in qualitative research, detailed thick description of the research context, participant demographics, and thematic findings allows readers to judge the applicability of results to similar settings.

Through these methodological safeguards, the study aimed to produce trustworthy, contextually

grounded insights into how ambidexterity is navigated within school environments.

Results

The results of the coding of the interview transcripts and field notes revealed that facilitators of organizational ambidexterity in schools can be categorized into the following themes (Diagram 1):

Theme 1: Instructional Leadership Orientation

Subthemes: Visionary Thinking, Risk Tolerance, Transformational Leadership

Leadership is the most important factor in the necessity of organizational ambidexterity in schools. School leaders who demonstrate visionary thinking articulate clear future-oriented goals while simultaneously acknowledging current operational constraints. As Participant 3 explained, “We have to keep our eyes on where we want our students to be in ten years, but at the same time, we cannot ignore the standards and procedures that hold the system together today”.

In schools where risk tolerance is not only accepted but actively encouraged, leaders provide safe spaces for innovation and protect employees from punitive consequences if new initiatives do not yield immediate results. One participant noted, “I tell my teachers, it’s okay if something doesn’t work perfectly the first time—what’s important is that we’re trying to improve”.

The appropriate leadership style for inclusive schools aligns with the principles of transformational leadership. Leaders inspire commitment to a shared vision, empower teachers to lead change, and foster intrinsic motivation. One participant emphasized, “When a principal trusts teachers to lead their own projects, they are empowered to do more than just follow instructions, and they feel like they are part of the school’s evolution”.

Theme 2: Structural and Policy Flexibility

Subthemes: Decentralized Decision-Making, Flexible Scheduling, Adaptive Resource Allocation

Organizational structures that allow for decentralized decision-making facilitate a more responsive and adaptive approach to routine and innovative tasks. Schools that distribute authority beyond the senior leadership team are more agile in responding to emerging challenges. One participant explained, “The school should not be run from the top. It should create working groups that make real decisions, and these schools should be more resilient”.

Flexible scheduling has also been identified as a structural enabler of ambidexterity. Teachers and departments should be given time to plan together, experiment, and reflect. One participant said, “Time should be set aside for innovation. This time is not just added to the workload, it is built into the week”.

Resource allocation practices reflect adaptive flexibility rather than rigid budgeting. Some schools have contingency reserves or direct funds toward emerging innovations. As one participant stated, “We have seen schools where the budget is not tightly tied—if there is a new program that aligns with the goals, resources can be allocated quickly”.

Theme 3: Cultural openness and psychological safety

Sub-themes: openness to feedback, tolerance of failure, staff empowerment

A culture of openness and psychological safety is a defining feature of two-way schools. Participants often emphasized the importance of feedback loops and reflective dialogue. One participant said, “Feedback is not just a performance review, it is part of how we grow together. Teachers give feedback to leaders and to each other”.

Tolerance of failure is also embedded in the organizational culture, allowing teachers to try new approaches without fear of negative judgment. One participant said, “Teachers should be encouraged to experiment, and if something fails, to analyze it rather than punish it. It is all part of the process”.

Staff and teacher empowerment was articulated through distributed leadership roles and opportunities for professional autonomy. One participant explained this change: “Before, we had to wait for approval on every little thing. Now, we have to trust each other to design and implement what we think will work best for our students”.

Theme 4: Strategic Alignment and Communication

Subthemes: Clear Communication Channels, Shared Vision, Stakeholder Engagement

The ability to balance innovation and continuity is significantly enhanced by coherent communication and a shared strategic purpose. Participants described the importance of clear communication channels that reduce ambiguity and align initiatives. “Everyone needs to know what the main goals are and make sure updates are shared regularly so there is no confusion,” one participant stated.

A shared vision among all stakeholders provides a stable foundation for exploring new paths. “Everyone needs to be rowing in the same direction, even when trying something new, but still connected to the main mission,” one participant noted.

Stakeholder engagement, including teachers, parents, and external partners, is a unifying factor that

helps foster innovation and accountability. “We need to include parents and the community in what we do, building trust and support that allows us to be bolder in our approaches,” explained one participant. The themes and subthemes are presented in Diagram 1.

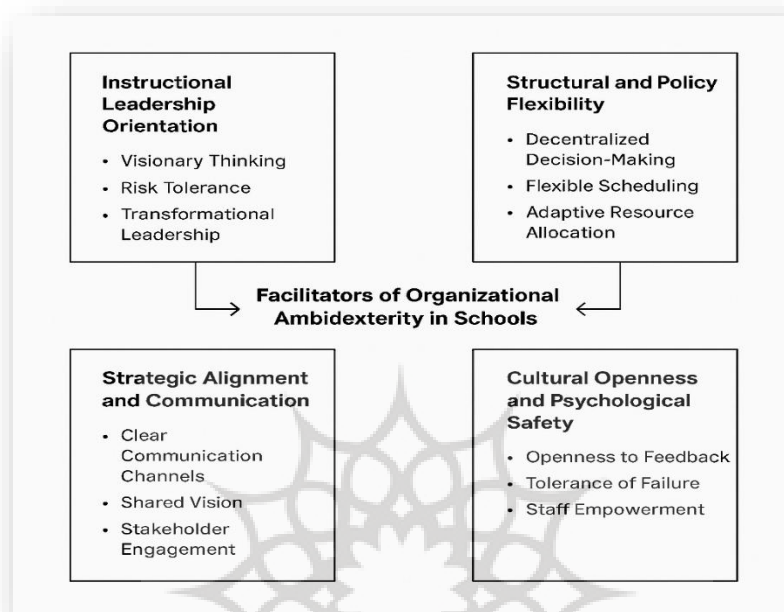


Diagram 1: Thematic Model of Facilitators of Organizational Ambidexterity in Schools

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the necessities and causal conditions of organizational ambidexterity in schools through a qualitative thematic analysis. By investigating how school leaders balance innovation and stability, the findings reveal a multidimensional understanding of ambidexterity as both a structural and relational phenomenon, deeply shaped by leadership cognition, culture, and policy context.

Unlike previous studies that merely confirmed ambidexterity's presence in educational organizations (De et al., 2020; Kazem & Salman, 2024), this research advances a new conceptual synthesis connecting ambidextrous, transformational, and adaptive leadership frameworks into an integrated model of “Educational Ambidextrous Leadership.”

1. Theoretical Innovation: From Confirmation to Integration

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in reframing organizational ambidexterity as a

dynamic leadership capability rather than a fixed structural state.

Previous works (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004) emphasized structural separation or contextual alignment as mechanisms to achieve balance between exploration and exploitation. However, this study demonstrates that in the schools context, ambidexterity is sustained through continuous cognitive and cultural negotiation, rather than structural differentiation alone.

By introducing the notion of “Educational Ambidextrous Leadership,” this research integrates three leadership paradigms—ambidextrous, transformational, and adaptive—into a cohesive theoretical framework.

Ambidextrous leadership provides strategic direction; transformational leadership injects motivational energy and shared purpose; and adaptive leadership facilitates contextual responsiveness and sensemaking (Heifetz et al., 2023; Xi et al., 2025).

This integration reflects a theoretical evolution from seeing leadership as hierarchical control to viewing it as an emergent process of dynamic balancing.

Furthermore, the study adds to recent discussions by Kazem & Salman, (2024) and J Popadiuk et al, (2018), who highlight that effective ambidexterity depends not only on structures but on leaders' cognitive complexity and reflective capacity.

In this sense, the current research contributes to the cognitive turn in educational leadership by linking ambidexterity with sensemaking and relational trust.

2. Comparing and Extending Previous Research

A critical comparison with prior literature underscores the novelty of this study.

Earlier research (Ng & Chua, 2023; Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017) focused on structural enablers—such as decentralization and team-based coordination—as precursors of ambidexterity. While these factors were confirmed, this study extends their interpretation by demonstrating how they interact dynamically with leadership sensemaking and cultural openness.

Similarly, Cahapay (2020) examined innovation during post-pandemic schooling but treated ambidexterity largely as a reaction to crisis. The present findings, however, conceptualize ambidexterity as a long-term adaptive capability, rooted in organizational learning rather than short-term survival.

The study also diverges from Xi et al. (2025), who emphasized teacher collaboration as the primary driver of ambidexterity. Here, collaboration is seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition—it must be anchored in trust-based leadership and shared cognitive framing to produce sustainable duality.

This comparative analysis highlights that the novelty of this study lies not in identifying new variables, but in revealing the interdependence among leadership, structure, and culture as systemic dimensions of ambidexterity.

3. Interpreting Key Themes: From Description to Critical Synthesis

Leadership Orientation

Leadership orientation emerged as the central enabler of ambidextrous capacity. While earlier studies (Leithwood et al., 2019; Sarghini et al, 2023) confirmed the value of transformational leadership in

innovation, this research reveals that transformational behaviors only enable ambidexterity when embedded in reflective, adaptive cognition.

Leaders were not merely vision-driven motivators but reflective sensemakers who balanced freedom with accountability.

This finding resonates with Popadiuk et al (2018), who describe “cognitive ambidexterity” as the ability to interpret paradoxes as complementary rather than conflicting. The present study contributes to this discussion by showing how such cognitive reframing occurs in schools through dialogue, shared reflection, and iterative learning cycles.

Structural and Policy Flexibility

Unlike structuralist views that treat ambidexterity as a matter of formal design (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013), this study positions structure as a living system shaped by policy interpretation.

Participants described “adaptive structures” that evolved organically through flexible scheduling, participatory budgeting, and collaborative governance.

This dynamic flexibility reflects the “complex adaptive systems” perspective (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), where responsiveness emerges from decentralized decision-making.

Moreover, policy flexibility was found to be as crucial as organizational flexibility. Leaders who exercised interpretive discretion in implementing top-down reforms could tailor policies to local needs, thus maintaining alignment without rigidity—an insight that adds contextual depth to ambidexterity theory in educational settings.

Cultural Openness and Psychological Safety

Previous studies (Guo et al., 2025; Schechter & Qadach, 2019) emphasized psychological safety as a facilitator of innovation. This research extends their findings by revealing that psychological safety also serves as a stabilizing force that protects organizational coherence amid experimentation.

Ambidextrous schools nurtured cultures where failure was treated as feedback rather than fault, transforming anxiety into collective learning.

This finding contributes to cultural perspectives on ambidexterity (Zimmermann et al., 2017) by demonstrating that openness and stability are not opposites but co-evolving cultural logics.

Strategic Alignment and Communication

This study also advances understanding of strategic alignment as an ongoing social negotiation rather than a fixed managerial outcome.

Through clear communication and shared purpose, leaders created coherence between exploration (innovation projects) and exploitation (core functions). Stakeholder participation served as both a governance mechanism and a cultural anchor.

This insight parallels Fullan's (2020) notion of coherence-building but adds an empirical dimension: alignment in ambidextrous schools emerges through collective sensemaking, not imposed conformity.

4. Educational Ambidextrous Leadership: A Unified Framework

Building upon the preceding themes, the study proposes the Educational Ambidextrous Leadership (EAL) framework, which captures the integration of strategic, motivational, and adaptive dimensions of leadership.

The Educational Ambidextrous Leadership (EAL) framework proposed in this study encompasses three interrelated dimensions—ambidextrous, transformational, and adaptive leadership—each performing a distinct yet complementary function in sustaining organizational balance.

The ambidextrous dimension provides the strategic foundation of the model. It enables leaders to balance exploration and exploitation by exercising strategic duality and contextual framing—the ability to recognize when to pursue innovation and when to consolidate established practices (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Kazem & Salman, 2024).

The transformational dimension serves as the motivational core. Through motivation, empowerment, and inspirational communication, transformational leaders mobilize teachers and staff toward a shared vision of change, fostering psychological commitment and collective efficacy (Leithwood et al., 2019).

Finally, the adaptive dimension represents the model's dynamic and relational component. It enables leaders to navigate uncertainty through learning by engaging in sensemaking, flexibility, and co-creation with stakeholders. Adaptive leaders interpret complex challenges as opportunities for collective problem-solving and institutional learning (Heifetz et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Together, these dimensions form a coherent system in which strategic ambidexterity establishes direction, transformational leadership energizes

people, and adaptive leadership ensures contextual responsiveness—allowing schools to sustain innovation while maintaining organizational stability.

This triadic model positions educational leadership as a dynamic balancing act—strategic in vision, motivational in engagement, and adaptive in execution.

It also clarifies how leaders transition fluidly among these modes depending on context:

- In moments of innovation, transformational energy dominates;
- During periods of constraint, adaptive sensemaking prevails;
- In stable conditions, ambidextrous cognition sustains equilibrium.

This framework thus provides a conceptual lens for analyzing how leaders operationalize ambidexterity in real-world educational systems, extending beyond the descriptive typologies of earlier works.

5. Theoretical Implications

This study makes three significant theoretical contributions:

1. Integration of Leadership Paradigms:

It bridges the fragmentation between ambidextrous, transformational, and adaptive leadership theories, positioning them as interdependent mechanisms within a single system.

2. Contextualization to Education:

It extends organizational ambidexterity theory from corporate and higher education domains into public schooling, where policy, equity, and accountability coexist with innovation needs.

3. Shift from Structure to Process:

It redefines ambidexterity as an ongoing process of meaning-making and interaction, not a static organizational design.

These insights align with emerging scholarship in 2024–2025 that reframes organizational theory around human-centered adaptability (Guo et al., 2025; Xi et al., 2025; Hedayatirad et al., 2025).

Practical Implications

In addition to its theoretical value, this study offers several actionable recommendations:

1. Leadership Development Programs:

Professional development should focus on cultivating paradoxical thinking, reflective dialogue, and adaptive decision-making. Training modules can integrate real-life case simulations to help leaders practice balancing innovation with compliance.

2. Policy and Governance Reform:

Policymakers should design accountability frameworks that reward both innovation and stability, recognizing dual performance indicators (e.g., student outcomes and pedagogical innovation).

3. Organizational Learning Systems:

Schools should institutionalize learning loops—periodic reflection sessions, innovation workshops, and cross-departmental collaboration—to transform tacit knowledge into shared institutional capability.

4. Cultural Transformation Strategies:

Building psychological safety requires deliberate efforts to normalize failure as learning and promote open communication. Leadership must model vulnerability and inquiry-based dialogue.

5. Digital and Data-Driven Ambidexterity:

In alignment with recent findings by Guo et al., 2025, integrating digital tools and analytics can enhance leaders' cognitive flexibility and support adaptive planning in dynamic educational environments.

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. Its qualitative design limits generalizability, and its focus on specific regional contexts may not represent all educational systems. Future studies could employ comparative or longitudinal designs to examine how ambidextrous leadership evolves over time and across cultures.

Quantitative validation of the Educational Ambidextrous Leadership framework could further clarify the relationships among leadership dimensions, cultural conditions, and school outcomes.

Additionally, future work might explore how digital transformation mediates ambidextrous leadership effectiveness, particularly in hybrid learning environments emerging after 2024.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributes a comprehensive and integrative model of ambidexterity in schools, demonstrating that the ability to balance exploration and exploitation depends less on formal structure and more on leadership cognition, cultural openness, and adaptive systems thinking.

By conceptualizing Educational Ambidextrous Leadership as the synthesis of strategic, transformational, and adaptive dimensions, the study advances a more holistic understanding of leadership for complex educational environments.

Theoretically, it extends ambidexterity research into the underexplored domain of schooling, offering a bridge between organizational theory and educational practice.

Practically, it provides leaders and policymakers with strategies for designing learning-oriented, flexible, and resilient educational systems that can sustain innovation without sacrificing stability.

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