

Strategic Planning Practices in Supporting Whole-School Improvement: A Conceptual Analysis

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v15-i4/29101>

Published Online: 10 October 2026

Abstract

Strategic planning has become an essential management approach for enhancing school quality and ensuring sustainable organisational improvement. This conceptual paper examines strategic planning practices in supporting whole-school improvement through a critical analysis of two key empirical studies conducted by Carvalho et al. (2022) and Forssten Seiser et al. (2023). These studies were selected because of their strong relevance to strategic planning and school improvement within educational organisations. The paper aims to (i) analyse strategic planning practices that support whole-school improvement, (ii) identify the key elements contributing to the effectiveness of strategic planning, and (iii) synthesise the findings of both studies to explain how strategic planning contributes to improving overall school quality. The analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of strategic planning is largely influenced by strategic leadership, the active engagement of all school stakeholders through the Whole School Approach (WSA), evidence-based decision-making, and a culture of continuous improvement. The discussion further interprets these findings through Parsons' Social Systems Theory and Bryson's Strategic Management Model, illustrating how interactions among organisational components facilitate the effective implementation of strategic initiatives. Within the Malaysian educational context, several challenges remain evident, including the gap between strategic planning and implementation, limited utilisation of data for decision-making, insufficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and inconsistent stakeholder participation throughout the planning process. Overall, this conceptual paper argues that strategic planning should be regarded not merely as an administrative exercise but as a dynamic, collaborative, and evidence-informed management process capable of driving sustainable whole-school improvement and strengthening educational quality.

Keywords: Strategic Planning, School Improvement, School Quality, Strategic Leadership, Strategic Management, Whole School Approach (WSA)

Introduction

Education plays a fundamental role in human capital development and contributes significantly to national progress and sustainable socio-economic development. In an increasingly complex and rapidly changing educational environment, schools are expected to

respond not only to academic demands but also to broader challenges involving student well-being, character development, twenty-first-century competencies, technological change, and evolving societal expectations. These demands have strengthened the need for schools to continuously improve their organisational capacity and educational practices. Consequently, school improvement is no longer regarded as a short-term intervention aimed solely at improving academic performance, but increasingly as a continuous organisational process involving leadership, teaching and learning, professional development, stakeholder engagement, school culture, and student development.

Within this broader context of school improvement, strategic planning has emerged as an important organisational mechanism for providing direction, coordinating resources, and translating institutional priorities into systematic actions. Strategic planning refers to a systematic process through which organisations establish their long-term direction, formulate strategic objectives, and design coordinated actions to achieve those objectives (Davies, 2006). In the school context, strategic planning enables educational organisations to identify their strengths and weaknesses, respond to internal and external challenges, allocate resources strategically, and establish priorities for organisational improvement. More importantly, it provides a structured basis for schools to move from reactive management towards proactive and future-oriented organisational development. Carvalho et al. (2022) demonstrate that effective school strategies depend on clearly articulated visions, missions, strategic directions, systematic decision-making, and coordinated organisational actions. Their findings further indicate that the quality of strategic implementation is closely associated with the quality and coherence of the planning process itself.

However, contemporary school improvement requires more than effective planning structures. The implementation of strategic priorities depends on the capacity of the entire school community to work collectively towards shared goals. This perspective is closely aligned with the Whole School Approach (WSA), which conceptualises school improvement as a collective process involving school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and the wider community. Rather than addressing individual aspects of school performance in isolation, the WSA emphasises the integration of leadership, teaching and learning, professional learning, organisational culture, stakeholder participation, and continuous improvement. Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) demonstrate that successful whole-school development requires school leaders to mobilise and coordinate the wider school community around shared educational goals. Active stakeholder participation can strengthen collective ownership, organisational learning, and the sustainability of improvement efforts.

The relationship between strategic planning and whole-school improvement can therefore be understood as both a managerial and social-organisational process. Strategic planning provides the structure through which schools analyse their environment, establish priorities, formulate strategies, implement planned actions, and evaluate progress. At the same time, whole-school improvement requires interaction, collaboration, shared responsibility, and organisational learning among different stakeholders. This distinction is important because a strategically well-designed plan may have limited impact if it is implemented as an administrative document without meaningful participation from the school community. Conversely, stakeholder collaboration may lack direction and sustainability without a systematic strategic planning process. The integration of these two perspectives therefore

provides a stronger basis for understanding how schools can translate strategic intentions into sustained organisational improvement.

The need to examine this relationship is particularly relevant within the Malaysian educational context. The Ministry of Education Malaysia has emphasised strategic leadership, evidence-informed decision-making, organisational improvement, and systematic educational planning as important components of strengthening the quality of the national education system. Nevertheless, the implementation of strategic planning at school level continues to encounter challenges, including the gap between planning and implementation, variations in strategic management competencies among school leaders, limited utilisation of organisational data, inconsistent stakeholder participation, and weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation. These challenges suggest that the effectiveness of strategic planning cannot be understood solely by examining the existence of strategic plans; rather, attention must also be given to how planning is implemented, coordinated, evaluated, and collectively owned within the school organisation.

Although previous studies have examined strategic planning, school leadership, organisational improvement, and stakeholder participation, the literature remains relatively fragmented in explaining how the managerial and social dimensions of strategic planning interact to support comprehensive whole-school improvement. Existing studies often emphasise either the structural processes of strategic management or the collaborative dimensions of school development. Consequently, there is a need for a more integrated conceptual understanding that connects strategic planning processes with the social relationships and collective participation required for sustainable school improvement. This conceptual gap provides the rationale for synthesising evidence from studies that approach school improvement from complementary strategic-management and whole-school perspectives.

Accordingly, this conceptual paper examines strategic planning practices in supporting whole-school improvement through a critical analysis and synthesis of two selected empirical studies: Carvalho et al. (2022) and Forssten Seiser et al. (2023). The two studies were selected because they provide complementary perspectives on the relationship between strategic planning, organisational development, leadership, stakeholder engagement, and whole-school improvement. Carvalho et al. (2022) primarily emphasise the strategic management processes involved in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, whereas Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) highlight the collaborative and organisational dimensions of the Whole School Approach. Bringing these perspectives together enables a broader interpretation of strategic planning as both a structured management process and a collaborative organisational practice.

The novelty of this conceptual paper lies in its integration of these two complementary perspectives through Parsons' Social Systems Theory (1951) and the Strategic Management Model proposed by Bryson (2018) and Wheelen and Hunger (2012). While Social Systems Theory explains the importance of interdependence, collaboration, and coordinated relationships among school stakeholders, the Strategic Management Model explains the systematic processes through which organisational priorities are analysed, formulated, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. The integration of these perspectives provides a

conceptual lens for explaining how strategic planning can function as a connecting mechanism between organisational structure, strategic leadership, stakeholder collaboration, evidence-informed decision-making, and continuous improvement. This integrated perspective constitutes the main conceptual contribution of the paper to the social sciences, particularly the fields of educational management, organisational studies, and educational leadership.

The paper therefore contributes to the social sciences in three ways. First, it synthesises empirical evidence from two contemporary international studies to establish a more integrated understanding of strategic planning and whole-school improvement. Second, it connects strategic management processes with the social and relational dimensions of school organisations, thereby extending the interpretation of strategic planning beyond an administrative function. Third, it provides a conceptual framework that may serve as a reference for educational leaders, policymakers, and researchers in examining how organisational collaboration and systematic strategic management can jointly support sustainable school improvement, particularly within the Malaysian educational context.

Specifically, the paper pursues three objectives:

1. To analyse strategic planning practices that support whole-school improvement based on two selected empirical studies.
2. To identify the key elements of strategic planning that contribute to effective school improvement.
3. To synthesise the findings of the two studies in explaining how strategic planning supports comprehensive school improvement.

To achieve these objectives, Carvalho et al. (2022) and Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) are used as the primary empirical sources of analysis. Although the studies were conducted in different national contexts, both address organisational processes associated with school improvement and provide complementary insights into strategic leadership, stakeholder engagement, implementation, organisational learning, and continuous improvement. Their synthesis therefore provides a useful basis for developing a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of strategic planning as a mechanism for sustainable whole-school improvement.

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

Social Systems Theory

This conceptual paper adopts Parsons' Social Systems Theory (1951) as one of its primary theoretical foundations for explaining how strategic planning supports comprehensive school improvement. According to Parsons (1951), an organisation functions as a social system comprising multiple interdependent components that interact to achieve common organisational goals. Within the school context, these components include school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and the wider community, all of whom contribute to organisational effectiveness through their respective roles.

From the perspective of Social Systems Theory, school improvement should not be viewed as the responsibility of individual leaders alone but rather as the outcome of coordinated interactions among all members of the organisation. Each stakeholder performs a distinct yet complementary function, and the effectiveness of the school depends on the harmonious integration of these functions. Consequently, strategic planning should be understood as a

collaborative organisational process rather than an administrative task undertaken solely by school management. Active participation by all stakeholders helps ensure that strategic priorities genuinely reflect the needs of the school and contribute meaningfully to sustainable school improvement.

This perspective is clearly reflected in the findings of Forssten Seiser et al. (2023), who reported that the successful implementation of the Whole School Approach (WSA) depends largely on the active participation of the entire school community throughout the organisational change process. Their study demonstrates that effective school leaders are responsible for coordinating collaboration among diverse stakeholders in order to cultivate a school culture that promotes continuous learning, organisational development, and sustained improvement. Such findings closely correspond to the central principles of Social Systems Theory, which emphasise that organisational effectiveness emerges from the dynamic interactions among interconnected social subsystems.

Carvalho et al. (2022) provide a complementary perspective by demonstrating that the quality of school strategic action plans depends on the extent to which plans address relevant dimensions of school improvement. Their study identified parental and community involvement as one of nine quality indicators for evaluating strategic action plans. From the perspective of Social Systems Theory, this reinforces the importance of understanding strategic planning within the wider organisational system, while recognising that Carvalho et al. (2022) primarily evaluated the quality of written strategic action plans rather than directly examining stakeholder interactions.

Therefore, Social Systems Theory provides a robust theoretical framework for explaining how strategic planning contributes to comprehensive school improvement by strengthening collaboration, coordination, and interdependence among all organisational members.

Strategic Management Model

In addition to Social Systems Theory, this conceptual paper employs the Strategic Management Model as the principal framework for explaining how strategic planning facilitates whole-school improvement. The model conceptualises strategic management as a systematic organisational process involving planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous refinement in pursuit of long-term organisational objectives.

According to Bryson (2018), strategic management enables organisations to determine their future direction through environmental analysis, goal setting, strategic formulation, implementation, and ongoing evaluation. Likewise, Davies (2006) argues that strategic management enables schools to shift from reactive administrative practices towards proactive, future-oriented leadership. Such an approach allows schools to anticipate emerging challenges, identify organisational priorities, allocate resources effectively, and implement targeted interventions that continuously enhance institutional performance.

The Strategic Management Model adopted in this paper is adapted from the frameworks proposed by Wheelen and Hunger (2012) and Bryson (2018). It comprises six interconnected stages:

1. Environmental analysis (internal and external);
2. Formulation of organisational vision and mission;

3. Development of strategic objectives;
4. Strategy formulation and planning;
5. Strategy implementation; and
6. Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and organisational improvement.

These interconnected processes enable school leaders to identify organisational needs through systematic analysis of environmental information and institutional data. Based on these findings, appropriate strategic initiatives can then be developed to strengthen teaching and learning, enhance teachers' professional development, improve organisational management, and increase student achievement. Continuous monitoring and evaluation subsequently ensure that implemented strategies remain relevant, effective, and responsive to changing organisational needs.

Accordingly, the Strategic Management Model has a direct relationship with the focus of this conceptual paper because strategic planning represents the primary mechanism through which comprehensive school improvement is achieved. Sustainable school improvement requires clearly defined planning processes, systematic implementation, and continuous evaluation to ensure that every strategic initiative contributes meaningfully to improving school quality.

The findings of Carvalho et al. (2022) provide relevant empirical support for several components of the Strategic Management Model, particularly the importance of systematic planning, implementation, and monitoring. Their study developed nine quality indicators for evaluating school strategic action plans: alignment; responsiveness to students' population and school context; comprehensiveness; SMART goals; evidence- and research-based strategies; parental and community involvement; implementation; data-based decisions and monitoring; and professional development focus. Carvalho et al. (2022) are more appropriately interpreted as providing empirical evidence of the quality gaps that strategic management processes need to address, rather than as demonstrating that existing strategic action plans were consistently effective.

Similarly, Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) demonstrate that the successful implementation of the Whole School Approach (WSA) depends upon school leaders' ability to plan, coordinate, implement, and monitor organisational change systematically. Their findings reinforce the argument that comprehensive school improvement requires sound strategic management practices capable of aligning all members of the school community towards common organisational goals. Overall, the Strategic Management Model offers a comprehensive framework for explaining how strategic planning enables schools to manage organisational change systematically while fostering sustainable school improvement.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this paper is developed through the integration of Parsons' Social Systems Theory (1951) and the Strategic Management Model proposed by Bryson (2018) and Wheelen and Hunger (2012). Social Systems Theory conceptualises schools as integrated social systems in which multiple organisational components interact collectively to achieve shared educational goals. In contrast, the Strategic Management Model explains the systematic process of organisational planning, beginning with environmental analysis and

extending through strategy implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement.

Within this conceptual framework, strategic planning practices function as the principal mechanism that drives comprehensive school improvement. Effective strategic planning strengthens strategic leadership, enhances teaching and learning, supports teachers' professional development, promotes community engagement, and improves students' well-being. Collectively, these dimensions contribute to greater organisational effectiveness and ultimately lead to sustained improvements in overall school quality.

The framework therefore illustrates that strategic planning is not an isolated administrative activity but rather an integrated organisational process that connects leadership, stakeholder collaboration, evidence-informed decision-making, and continuous improvement in achieving whole-school excellence.

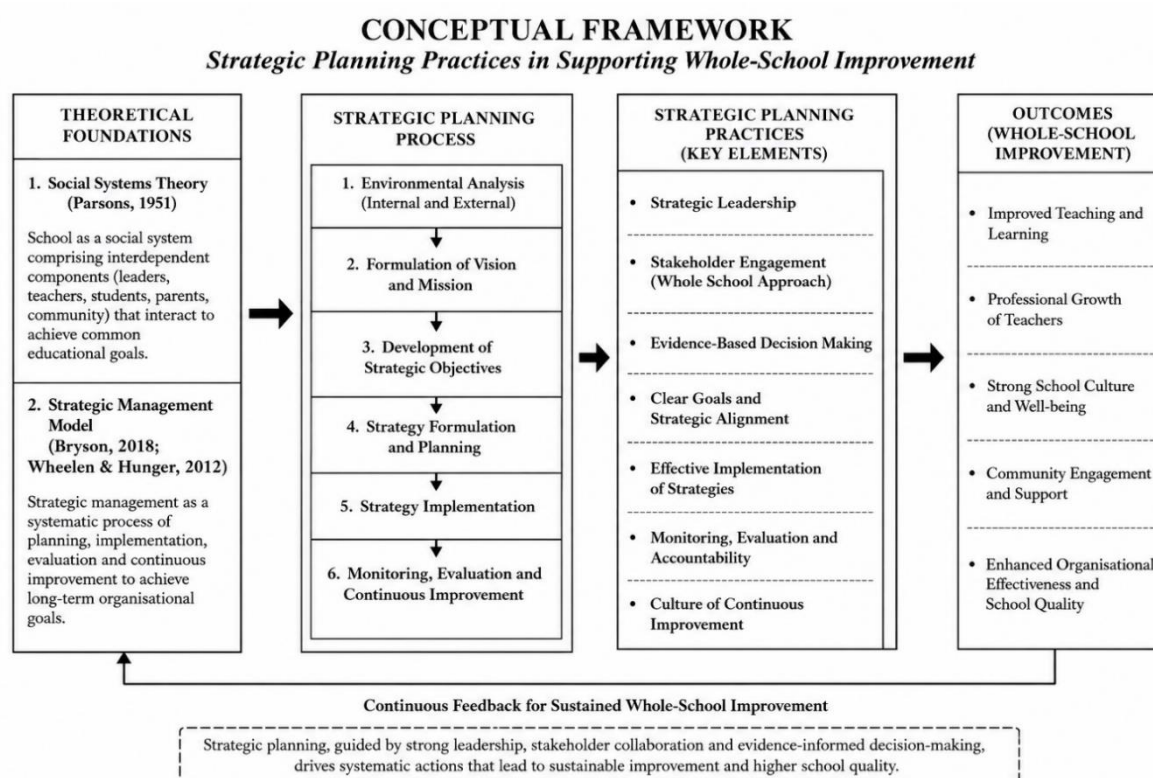


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the Selected Studies

a. Analysis of Carvalho et al. (2022)

Carvalho et al. (2022) examine the quality of Strategic Action Plans (SAPs) developed by Portuguese schools as instruments for supporting school improvement. Rather than investigating strategic planning through a case study of selected schools, the study focuses on identifying quality indicators that can be used to evaluate school improvement plans and examining the extent to which these indicators are reflected in Portuguese school SAPs. The

study was conducted within the Portuguese educational context, where schools were required to develop SAPs as part of the National Programme to Promote Educational Success.

The researchers employed qualitative content analysis using three main sources: educational literature related to school planning and evaluation, guidelines and recommendations issued by the Portuguese Ministry of Education, and 663 SAPs implemented in Portuguese schools. The analysis was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved inductive analysis to identify relevant quality indicators from the available literature, national guidelines, and school plans. The second phase involved deductive analysis in which the identified indicators were used as categories for evaluating the 663 SAPs.

The analysis resulted in nine quality indicators for school strategic action plans: (1) alignment, (2) tailoring to students' population and school context, (3) comprehensiveness, (4) SMART goals, (5) evidence- and research-based strategies, (6) parental and community involvement, (7) implementation, (8) data-based decisions and monitoring, and (9) professional development focus. These indicators were intended to provide a systematic basis for assessing the quality of school improvement plans.

The findings reveal several important weaknesses in the quality of the SAPs. Although the plans included problem identification, goals, proposed activities, and implementation information, they generally lacked a comprehensive and integrated connection between identified needs, goals, and proposed solutions. The study also found that most goals were not formulated in a fully SMART manner, while explicit references to evidence- and research-based practices were absent. Similarly, data-based decision-making and monitoring were weak because the plans generally included indicators or data collection tools but provided limited information regarding monitoring moments, participants, regulation, and feedback. Professional development was also included in the plans but was not generally articulated as an integrated response to identified school needs.

Two relatively stronger dimensions were identified: alignment and implementation. However, alignment was primarily associated with national educational priorities rather than explicit reference to individual school mission and vision. The study also found that implementation was represented across the plans, although the degree of detail regarding activities, resources, and participants varied considerably.

Overall, Carvalho et al. (2022) conclude that the existence of a school strategic action plan does not necessarily indicate a high-quality strategic planning process. The analysed plans were often more descriptive or constituted lists of actions than comprehensive strategic instruments. The study therefore highlights the importance of evaluating the quality of planning processes and plans themselves, particularly in relation to comprehensiveness, evidence-based strategies, data-based decision-making, monitoring, and alignment with school-specific strategic direction.

b. Analysis of Forssten Seiser et al. (2023)

Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) investigate the implementation of the Whole School Approach (WSA) as a comprehensive strategy for promoting sustainable school improvement. Unlike traditional improvement initiatives that focus primarily on isolated aspects of school

performance, the Whole School Approach emphasises the collective involvement of all members of the school community in organisational development and educational improvement.

The researchers employed a qualitative research design to explore how school leaders, teachers, and other educational stakeholders collaboratively contribute to school development within the Swedish educational context. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, the study provides valuable insights into the organisational processes that support collaborative school improvement. A key finding is that stakeholder engagement represents one of the most critical determinants of successful school improvement. Effective school leaders actively involve teachers, students, parents, and community members in identifying organisational priorities, implementing improvement strategies, and evaluating educational outcomes. Such collaborative participation fosters shared ownership of school improvement initiatives and strengthens organisational commitment to achieving common goals.

The study further demonstrates that successful implementation of the Whole School Approach requires distributed leadership rather than leadership concentrated solely within the principal's office. Leadership responsibilities are shared across the organisation, enabling teachers and other stakeholders to contribute actively to decision-making processes and organisational development. This collaborative leadership model promotes professional learning, strengthens organisational capacity, and enhances the sustainability of improvement efforts.

Another important contribution of the study is its emphasis on cultivating a culture of continuous improvement. Schools that encourage reflective practice, collaborative learning, and ongoing professional dialogue are more capable of adapting to emerging challenges and sustaining organisational development over time. Continuous improvement is therefore viewed as a collective organisational responsibility rather than an individual obligation. The findings also highlight the significance of evidence-informed decision-making. School leaders are encouraged to utilise multiple sources of data—including student achievement information, teacher feedback, classroom observations, and stakeholder perspectives—to guide planning and evaluate the effectiveness of improvement initiatives. Data-driven decision-making strengthens accountability while ensuring that strategic interventions remain responsive to organisational needs.

Overall, Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) conclude that sustainable school improvement is most effectively achieved when strategic leadership, stakeholder collaboration, evidence-informed decision-making, and a culture of continuous improvement are integrated within the organisational practices of schools. The Whole School Approach therefore provides a practical framework through which strategic planning can be translated into meaningful educational improvement.

c. Comparative Analysis of the Two Studies

Although Carvalho et al. (2022) and Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) were conducted in different national contexts and examine different dimensions of school improvement, their findings provide complementary perspectives on strategic planning and organisational development.

Carvalho et al. (2022) focus on the quality of school Strategic Action Plans through the analysis of 663 Portuguese school plans, whereas Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) examine school development through a Whole School Approach. Consequently, the two studies should not be interpreted as examining identical aspects of strategic planning.

Carvalho et al. (2022) provide a structured perspective on the quality of strategic planning documents. Their findings highlight the importance of alignment, contextual responsiveness, comprehensiveness, SMART goals, evidence- and research-based strategies, stakeholder involvement, implementation, data-based monitoring, and professional development. Importantly, their analysis demonstrates that several of these dimensions were weakly represented in the Portuguese SAPs, particularly comprehensiveness, evidence- and research-based strategies, data-based monitoring, and professional development.

In contrast, Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) provide a complementary perspective concerning the organisational and collaborative dimensions of whole-school improvement. The juxtaposition of these studies therefore suggests that high-quality strategic planning requires both an appropriate structural planning process and organisational conditions that support collaborative implementation.

The main contribution of comparing the two studies is therefore not that they produce identical findings, but that they illuminate different dimensions of school improvement. Carvalho et al. (2022) draw attention to the quality and completeness of strategic action plans, while Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) contribute insights into the organisational and collaborative processes associated with whole-school development. Together, these perspectives support the conceptual argument of the present paper that strategic planning should be understood as both a structured management process and an organisational practice embedded within the wider school system.

Issues and Challenges of Strategic Planning in the Malaysian Educational Context

Despite continuous efforts by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) to strengthen school management through strategic planning, the effective implementation of strategic planning across Malaysian schools continues to face several significant challenges. While schools are required to develop strategic plans as part of their organisational management responsibilities, the extent to which these plans are translated into meaningful organisational practices varies considerably across educational institutions.

One of the most persistent challenges concerns the gap between strategic planning and implementation. In many schools, strategic plans are developed primarily to satisfy administrative or policy requirements rather than to serve as practical management tools that guide organisational improvement. Consequently, implementation often lacks consistency, systematic monitoring, and continuous evaluation. This implementation gap reduces the effectiveness of strategic planning in achieving its intended organisational outcomes and limits its contribution to sustainable school improvement.

A second challenge relates to the limited use of evidence-informed decision-making within school management. Although schools routinely collect substantial amounts of educational data—including student achievement records, attendance information, classroom

observation reports, and school performance indicators—these data are not always utilised effectively during the strategic planning process. Decisions are, in some instances, influenced more by administrative routines or individual judgement than by systematic analysis of empirical evidence. As highlighted by Carvalho et al. (2022), effective strategic planning requires organisational decisions to be grounded in reliable evidence that accurately reflects the school's current needs and priorities.

Another important issue concerns stakeholder participation. The findings of Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) demonstrate that sustainable school improvement depends upon the active engagement of teachers, students, parents, and the wider community throughout the strategic planning process. However, stakeholder involvement within Malaysian schools often remains limited to consultation during the preparation of planning documents, with relatively little participation during implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. As a result, many strategic initiatives lack the collective ownership necessary for sustained organisational commitment and long-term success.

Schools also encounter challenges associated with leadership capacity and strategic management competencies. Effective strategic planning requires school leaders to possess advanced competencies in environmental analysis, strategic thinking, organisational leadership, data interpretation, change management, and performance evaluation. Variations in leadership experience and professional expertise may influence the quality of strategic planning and its implementation across schools. Continuous professional development in strategic leadership is therefore essential to strengthen school leaders' capacity to lead evidence-informed and sustainable improvement initiatives.

Another recurring concern is the monitoring and evaluation of strategic implementation. In many instances, monitoring activities focus primarily on documenting programme completion rather than evaluating the quality, effectiveness, and long-term impact of strategic initiatives. Without systematic evaluation mechanisms, schools may find it difficult to determine whether strategic objectives have been achieved or to identify areas requiring further improvement. Continuous monitoring should therefore function as an integral component of organisational learning rather than merely an administrative reporting requirement.

Furthermore, Malaysian schools continue to operate within an increasingly dynamic educational environment characterised by curriculum reforms, rapid technological advancement, evolving student needs, and changing national policy priorities. These developments require schools to adopt more adaptive and flexible strategic planning processes capable of responding effectively to emerging organisational challenges. Strategic planning should therefore be viewed as a dynamic and iterative process rather than a static document prepared for a fixed planning cycle.

Collectively, these challenges indicate that strengthening strategic planning within Malaysian schools requires more than the preparation of formal strategic plans. Rather, it demands the development of strong strategic leadership, meaningful stakeholder engagement, evidence-informed decision-making, systematic monitoring and evaluation, and an organisational culture that embraces continuous learning and improvement. Addressing these

interconnected challenges will enhance the capacity of schools to implement strategic planning more effectively and achieve sustainable whole-school improvement.

Implications for Malaysian Educational Practice

The synthesis of the two selected studies offers several important implications for educational leadership and policy in Malaysia. First, school leaders should reposition strategic planning as a continuous organisational management process rather than an annual administrative exercise. Strategic plans should actively guide school improvement priorities, resource allocation, and organisational decision-making throughout the implementation cycle.

Second, schools should strengthen stakeholder engagement by involving teachers, students, parents, and community partners throughout every stage of strategic planning—from environmental analysis and goal setting to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Such participation is likely to increase organisational commitment, strengthen collaborative leadership, and improve the sustainability of school improvement initiatives.

Third, greater emphasis should be placed on evidence-informed leadership. School leaders should develop the capacity to analyse organisational data systematically and utilise multiple sources of evidence to support strategic decisions. Strengthening data literacy among school leaders will enhance organisational accountability while improving the quality of educational decision-making.

Finally, professional development programmes for school leaders should place greater emphasis on strategic leadership competencies, including strategic thinking, organisational analysis, change management, performance evaluation, and collaborative leadership. Such competencies are increasingly important in enabling schools to respond effectively to complex educational challenges while maintaining a sustained focus on continuous organisational improvement.

Discussion

The findings derived from the two selected studies provide compelling evidence that strategic planning constitutes a fundamental organisational process for achieving sustainable whole-school improvement. A central theme emerging from both studies is the pivotal role of strategic leadership. Effective school leaders are not merely responsible for preparing strategic plans; they are instrumental in shaping organisational vision, mobilising stakeholders, allocating resources, monitoring implementation, and sustaining improvement initiatives. This finding reinforces the growing body of educational leadership literature, which consistently recognises school leadership as one of the most influential determinants of school effectiveness and organisational improvement. Strategic leadership enables school leaders to align organisational priorities with educational goals while creating conditions that support innovation, collaboration, and long-term institutional development.

The findings also demonstrate that successful strategic planning depends upon the meaningful participation of multiple stakeholders throughout the planning and implementation process. The Whole School Approach (WSA) highlighted by Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) illustrates that sustainable school improvement is most likely to occur when teachers, students, parents, and the wider community actively contribute to organisational

decision-making. Such collaborative participation strengthens collective ownership of improvement initiatives, enhances organisational commitment, and promotes a shared sense of responsibility for achieving educational excellence.

This collaborative perspective is consistent with Parsons' Social Systems Theory (1951), which conceptualises schools as integrated social systems composed of interdependent components working collectively towards common organisational objectives. From this theoretical perspective, organisational effectiveness emerges through the interaction and coordination of individuals rather than through isolated actions undertaken by school leaders alone. Consequently, strategic planning should be regarded as a collaborative organisational process that integrates leadership, communication, stakeholder engagement, and shared decision-making. The active involvement of all members of the school community strengthens organisational cohesion and contributes significantly to the successful implementation of strategic initiatives.

The analysis further indicates that evidence-informed decision-making is a critical component of effective strategic planning. Both studies emphasise the importance of utilising organisational data, performance indicators, stakeholder feedback, and contextual information to guide planning, implementation, and evaluation. Evidence-informed planning enables school leaders to formulate realistic strategic priorities, identify emerging organisational challenges, allocate resources efficiently, and continuously evaluate the effectiveness of improvement initiatives. Such practices strengthen organisational accountability while increasing the likelihood that strategic decisions will produce meaningful educational outcomes.

These findings are strongly supported by the Strategic Management Model proposed by Bryson (2018), which conceptualises strategic management as a cyclical process comprising environmental analysis, strategic formulation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement. The findings of Carvalho et al. (2022) closely reflect these stages by demonstrating that successful school improvement depends upon systematic planning followed by structured implementation and ongoing evaluation. Similarly, Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) show that collaborative planning and continuous organisational learning reinforce each stage of the strategic management process, thereby strengthening the sustainability of improvement efforts.

Another important issue highlighted in both studies concerns the development of a culture of continuous improvement. Sustainable school improvement cannot be achieved through isolated or short-term interventions; instead, it requires organisational cultures that encourage reflective practice, professional collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive leadership. Schools characterised by such cultures demonstrate greater organisational resilience and are better equipped to respond effectively to changing educational demands and policy reforms.

The synthesis of these findings therefore suggests that strategic planning should be conceptualised as an integrated organisational system rather than a sequence of discrete management activities. Effective strategic planning combines strategic leadership, collaborative participation, evidence-informed decision-making, systematic implementation,

and continuous evaluation within a coherent organisational framework. The interaction among these interconnected elements creates a dynamic process through which schools can continuously improve organisational performance and educational quality.

Collectively, the findings support the proposition that sustainable whole-school improvement depends not on individual organisational components operating independently but on the effective integration of leadership, strategic management processes, stakeholder collaboration, and organisational learning. Strategic planning therefore functions as the central organisational mechanism through which schools translate long-term educational aspirations into coordinated actions that generate measurable improvements in school quality and student outcomes.

Conclusion

Strategic planning has an important role in supporting school improvement but its contribution depends substantially on the quality of the planning process and the organisational conditions in which plans are implemented. This conceptual paper has examined strategic planning practices in supporting whole-school improvement through a critical analysis and synthesis of Carvalho et al. (2022) and Forssten Seiser et al. (2023). Carvalho et al. (2022) demonstrate that the existence of formal Strategic Action Plans does not necessarily indicate high-quality strategic planning. Their analysis identified important weaknesses in comprehensiveness, evidence- and research-based strategies, data-based decision-making and monitoring and professional development, despite relatively stronger representation of implementation and alignment with national priorities. In contrast, Forssten Seiser et al. (2023) provide complementary insights into the organisational and collaborative dimensions of whole-school improvement. These perspectives support the conceptual argument that sustainable whole-school improvement requires both coherent strategic planning processes and organisational conditions that enable meaningful implementation and collaboration. The integration of Parsons' Social Systems Theory (1951) and the Strategic Management Model proposed by Bryson (2018) and Wheelen and Hunger (2012) further strengthens this conceptual argument. Social Systems Theory highlights the interdependence and interaction of organisational members, whereas the Strategic Management Model provides a structured perspective on planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement. The synthesis therefore suggests that strategic planning should not be regarded merely as the production of a formal document, but as an integrated organisational process connecting strategic direction, contextual analysis, implementation, monitoring, stakeholder relationships, and continuous learning. The principal contribution of this conceptual paper lies in bringing these complementary perspectives together to explain how strategic planning can support whole-school improvement. The analysis also highlights the importance of evaluating the quality of strategic plans rather than assuming that their existence automatically leads to improvement. Future empirical research in Malaysia should examine whether the quality dimensions identified by Carvalho et al. (2022) are reflected in Malaysian school strategic plans and how these dimensions interact with leadership, stakeholder participation, organisational culture, and Whole School Approach practices across different school contexts.

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