Leadership Style in Education: Advantages and Challenges

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Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the various leadership models applied in the education sector, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. The models of administrative/managerial, instructional, transformational, distributed, transactional, ethical, contingent and participative leadership are presented, focusing on their contribution to improving the functioning of school organizations. The research highlights that no single model alone can meet the ever-changing needs of school settings and suggests a synthetic approach to leadership that combines the strengths of different models to create a flexible and adaptive leadership style. Integrating managerial and transformational practices, fostering collaboration through distributed and participatory leadership, and maintaining ethical integrity are critical factors in the success of educational organizations. This research contributes to providing a comprehensive comparative analysis of existing leadership approaches in education, bridging the research gap by formulating a theoretical framework that can guide the practical application of leadership in educational settings, enhancing the effectiveness and adaptability of school units to contemporary challenges.

Keywords:

Leadership Styles; Education; Educational Organizations; Principals

Introduction

Management in the educational sector has undergone significant changes since the 1980s, following the broader trends in management science (Katsaros, 2008: 106). In recent years, many leadership models in education have been developed, but there has yet to be a consensus on the most appropriate one for managing educational organizations. None of these models alone seems to be able to fully respond (Saiti & Saitis, 2012: 266, 268-269) to the ever-changing social and educational conditions (Giasemis, 2016: 158).

Understanding leadership theory is central as it offers tools for interpreting and analysing educational leadership practices (Bush & Glover, 2014: 565). Combined with policy, research and practice, theory helps principals broaden their perspective avoiding a limited one based solely on personal experience.

This research aims to provide an extensive literature review of the various models of leadership in the education sector, examining the differences and similarities between them and the practical challenges they face. This research is necessary due to the increasing complexity of educational organizations and the constant changes in the social and educational environment, which make selecting the appropriate leadership model a critical factor in the success of schools.

There are several categorisations of leadership models in education, with several of them overlapping (Katsaros, 2008: 106). In the literature, several important models are mentioned, such as administrative/ managerial leadership, instructional leadership, transformational, distributed, transactional, ethical, contingent and participative leadership (Bush, 2015: 487; Giasemis, 2016: 149-158; Katsaros, 2008: 106-107; Leithwood & Duke, 1999: 45-72; Tamisoglou, 2020: 67-89; Theofilidis, 2012: 209-223; Varelas, 2023: 12).

Administrative/Management Leadership

Administrative leadership in education, also known as managerial leadership, closely links the concept of leadership to administrative responsibilities and functions. In this context, the leader's power is mainly derived from his/her position in the hierarchy of the educational organization (Katsaros, 2008: 107). This approach assumes that the effective implementation of administrative functions facilitates the work of the organization's members (Leithwood & Duke, 1999: 52-53).

Administrative leadership emphasizes the structure and bureaucratic nature of the school, where the principal recognizes and strictly follows the hierarchy and rules of the organization. The school functions as a hierarchically structured organization where the responsibilities and duties of members are clearly defined, creating a formal linear model that defines relationships and levels of responsibility (Giasemis, 2016: 150-151).

This form of leadership tends to be inflexible and rigid, negatively affecting decision-making effectiveness (Giasemis, 2016: 150). Furthermore, firm adherence to regulations can limit the introduction of innovations and reduce creativity within the school unit (Bush, 2014: 163). Strict adherence to procedures can also hinder the formation of a shared vision and encouragement of staff, which may undermine school improvement and long-term effectiveness (Giasemis, 2016: 151).

Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is one of the most stable and enduring categories of leadership in the evolving typology of management models. It emerged in the United States of America when research showed that leadership can improve student achievement (Bush, 2015: 487). This model gained prominence in schools in the 20th and 21st centuries and was developed in the 1980s in response to the growing demand for quality education and to narrow the gap between high- and low-achieving students (Shitana, 2018: 135).

Murphy (1990: 170-171) proposed a framework for instructional leadership that includes four main dimensions:

- Developing mission and goals: Principals formulate and communicate clear goals for the school, promoting a shared vision and purpose.

- Managing the educational function: This function focuses on promoting quality teaching, evaluating the teaching process, managing instructional time well, and coordinating the curriculum.

- Promoting an academic learning climate: This includes creating positive expectations, encouraging motivation, and ensuring the active participation of the principal in all school activities.

- Creating a supportive work environment: This approach focuses on creating a safe and organised learning environment, promoting collaboration among staff, and encouraging active student participation.

According to Murphy's analysis, instructional leadership aims to support school units to achieve their primary goal of teaching and learning (Katsaros, 2008: 107). Leaders in this context focus on transforming the school into a learning community to achieve the learning goals set jointly with teachers. Furthermore, implementing instructional leadership promotes a collaborative environment where learning is a shared goal for all teachers (Shitana, 2018: 139).

Despite its significant advantages, instructional leadership has some limitations. A fundamental limitation is the tendency for strict top-down hierarchy and leadership, where the principal is seen as the primary source of guidance and strictly oversees the work of teachers and students (Shitana, 2018: 140). In addition, instructional leadership emphasises the 'what' rather than the 'how' to implement leadership effectively (Bush, 2011: 201). Many principals need more skills and knowledge to effectively implement this approach (Hallinger, 1992: 38), particularly in secondary education, where specialist knowledge is critical to improving the quality of education (Bush, 2015: 487). Finally, instructional leadership focuses on teaching and learning, overlooking other aspects of school life such as sports, socialisation and student wellbeing (Bush, 2007: 401).

These limitations have led to a shift in focus towards other leadership models, such as transformational and distributed leadership (Bush, 2015: 487).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership emerged as a theory in the 1970s and 1980s and became particularly popular in the educational community in the 1990s, reacting to the strict hierarchical management systems of the previous decade (Theofilidis, 2012: 210). Burns and Bass mainly influenced the basic concepts of transformational leadership (Katsaros, 2008: 108).

Burns, in 1978, argued that transformational leadership is manifested when leaders and their subordinates interact in such a way that they mutually elevate each other to higher levels of patience and morality. Through this interaction, individuals develop a shared vision for the Organization, commit to it, and build mutual trust, transforming it into a mantle community (Theofilidis, 2012: 209).

Bass, in 1985, extended Burns' ideas, identifying four critical dimensions of transformational leadership (Papathomopoulos, 2016: 40-41):

- Idealised influence (charisma): The leader evokes respect, trust and admiration.

- Inspired motivation: The leader articulates a clear, attractive vision and inspires subordinates to adopt it.

- Intellectual stimulation: The leader encourages innovation and creativity.

- Personalised support: The leader provides a supportive environment and responds to individual needs, promoting individual professional development.

Leithwood and colleagues, adapting these foundations to the educational context (Papathomopoulos, 2016: 42), developed in 1994 eight dimensions of transformational leadership in education: visioning, identifying goals, providing intellectual motivation, providing personalised support, providing models of best practice, cultivating high-performance expectations, developing a positive school culture and facilitating participation in decision-making (Katsaros, 2008: 109).

Transformational leadership involves a holistic approach to assessing critical factors, such as developing a solid vision and empowering stakeholders. A clear vision must be effectively communicated to engage all stakeholders while empowering teachers, students, parents, and the community is equally important. Leaders must create opportunities for participation and collaboration, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment (Faig, 2024: 10).

Transformational leadership promotes continuous improvement and change at all levels of the education system, inspiring teachers and students to thrive in a collaborative and supportive environment. In the education sector, this leadership model focuses on leading by example, inspiring and developing future leaders who will bring about positive change. A transformational leader ensures that students achieve academically and improve their learning while encouraging teachers to develop leadership skills and promote innovative educational practices (Abdallah & Ismail, 2024: 134-134, 140).

The proper implementation of transformational leadership can provide a solid foundation for educational success and personal growth, contributing positively to society (Faig, 2024: 10). However, the approach has been criticised, as some researchers point out that the constant effort of principals to transform teachers' attitudes can lead to authoritarian relationships, damaging the democratic nature of the school organization (Giasemis, 2016: 155).

To avoid such situations, reliable principal selection processes, ongoing training in administration and human resource management (Papathomopoulos, 2016: 65), and attending training programmes in transformational leadership (Anderson, 2017: 10-11) are necessary. Promoting school autonomy and reducing bureaucracy are also critical to the success of this leadership model (Papathomopoulos, 2016: 65).

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership has become one of the most debated topics in academia (Giasemis, 2016: 156). The concept was first introduced in the 1950s by the Australian psychologist Gibb (1954), who used the term to describe leadership as a collective activity shared among members of an organization (Kumari, 2021: 56). According to Gibb, distributed leadership involves a variety of roles and behaviors that can be shared, alternated, or co-exist simultaneously (Theofilidis, 2012: 223).

Distributed leadership differs significantly from the traditional concept of the 'hero leader', based on the idea that leadership is a process distributed throughout the organization. This way, expertise is mobilised at all school levels, creating more opportunities for change and improvement (Shava & Tlou, 2018: 279-280). Despite its distributed nature, the principal remains active, assessing situations, identifying opportunities and making critical decisions while facilitating leadership distribution and promoting vertical and horizontal communication (Theofilidis, 2012: 222-223).

This form of leadership is aligned with the principles of democracy, inclusiveness, and co-responsibility, which have been reinforced in the educational sector

in recent years. It recognises the professionalism and contribution of all members of the school community and encourages their meaningful participation (Giasemis, 2016: 162).

Distributed leadership is now considered one of the most essential practices in education for improving the quality of teaching and learning (Kumari, 2021: 56), as it incorporates the participation of many school community members in decision-making and forming a shared vision. This participatory approach increases teacher engagement and leads to better learning outcomes. Research has shown that distributed leadership positively impacts learning outcomes, as leadership exercised collectively by principals and teachers has a more significant impact than other forms of leadership, such as instructional leadership (Giasemis, 2016: 157, 161).

Moreover, distributed leadership helps strengthen teachers' skills and create a climate of mutual trust. This has a positive impact not only on teachers but also on the overall improvement of the school, as it encourages collaboration and active participation in promoting innovation and change in the school environment (Theofilidis, 2012: 222).

Despite its benefits, distributed leadership comes with challenges (Torrance, 2013: 362-366). Power distribution may only sometimes be smooth and often requires time and effort to implement effectively. In addition, problems such as inter-team stress, lack of communication and conflict may arise (Giasemis, 2016: 162-163). Some teachers may be reluctant to take on leadership roles because they need more time or prefer to focus on other responsibilities. Others may need more skills and knowledge to lead effectively (Torrance, 2013: 363, 367).

These challenges are often a reality in the school setting as they relate to the school's culture and the complexity of roles in an ever-changing organization that faces daily challenges. Despite its shortcomings, distributed leadership has the potential to offer solutions and contribute to improving education. Principals and teachers are called upon to work together to shape the school's shared vision and culture (Giasemis, 2016: 163).

Transactional Leadership

Burns introduced transactional leadership in 1978. This model focuses on creating transactional relationships between the leader and employees. It examines how principals use authority and incentives, such as rewards, to shape employee behavior and positively influence organizational performance (Dong, 2023: 21).

In this approach, the principal tries to secure the cooperation of subordinates by providing rewards. Transactional leaders ask employees to perform specific tasks and, in return, offer them rewards when their effort and performance are deemed satisfactory (Saiti & Saitis, 2012: 268).

The relationship of transactional leadership with employees is based on exchanging benefits and achieving mutual goals. Although this approach can improve organizational effectiveness, there is a risk that employee morale may be undermined if leaders focus exclusively on their interests or if employees feel exploited. Transactional leaders must consider employees' needs and interests to build relationships that enhance morale and organizational stability (Dong, 2023: 22).

A key characteristic of transactional leadership is the need for long-term commitment, as the relationships developed are temporary and transaction-based. In this model, educational leaders try to balance exercising authority and working with staff to achieve school goals. However, maintaining good relationships through mutual concessions can negatively affect the quality and effectiveness of the school unit (Giasemis, 2016: 151-152, 159).

Transactional leaders' personal characteristics, such as confidence and determination, play an important role in their effectiveness. They need to have clear goals, communicate effectively, and make decisions that keep the organization competitive. However, overconfidence can make them authoritarian and egotistical, negatively affecting teamwork and cohesion among organization members (Dong, 2023: 22).

Transactional leadership can be seen as a flexible form of leadership, as it is based on exchange between stakeholders in the school community (Giasemis, 2016: 159). Principals who adopt this model can positively influence the organization's performance and achieve high performance. However, their role may need to be improved, hindering innovation and long-term development. The behavior of transactional leaders is influenced by personal and environmental factors such as individual characteristics, work experience and the organization's culture. Training and developing communication and decision-making skills can improve their leadership behavior and increase organizational performance (Dong, 2023: 24).

Ethical Leadership

Ethics comes from the Greek word "ethos", which initially referred to the habits and practices that differentiate a society or group of individuals from others. Over time, the concept has been expanded to describe the behavior and character of individuals who are considered decent and ethical. Ethics can influence by creating positive relationships and making ethical decisions (Özan et al., 2017: 164).

Ethical leadership is a managerial approach that emphasises moral values in both the personal and professional lives of leaders (Göçen, 2021: 38). This leadership model is characterised by the ability of leaders to distinguish right from wrong and act on these distinctions, guiding others through ethical practices to achieve common goals (Özan et al., 2017: 164).

Principals who act ethically gain the trust and support of their employees, as employees assume that these leaders will make ethical decisions regardless of the circumstances (Özan et al., 2017: 162). Ethical leadership creates an environment where the core values are justice, respect, equality, democracy and positive human relations (Ghanem, 2018: 244). Principals are expected to make ethical decisions when resolving various issues, such as conflicts among school community members (Özan et al., 2017: 162).

Ethical leadership in educational organizations includes four main dimensions: the decision-making process, behavioral ethics, the communication process, and the formation of the organizational climate. Principals are required to ensure that their decisions are ethically sound and to act with honesty and fairness. They must encourage knowledge development by adhering to values such as honesty, equity and accountability while shaping a culture that supports ethical behavior and job satisfaction among teachers (Ghanem, 2018: 247-248). Codes of ethics help principals make decisions based on ethical principles, reducing subjectivity (Özan et al., 2017: 162).

Ethical leadership is closely related to the effective functioning of school units (Göçen, 2021: 38). However, its implementation can lead to negative consequences if a principal's level of ethics and authenticity differs from that of the organization and other members of the school community, which can cause conflicts. There is also a risk that basic needs, such as teachers' professional development, may be underestimated and that secondary areas of school life may be emphasised to form a 'common ethic' (Giasemis, 2016: 153-154).

Contingent Leadership

Contingent leadership in the education sector recognizes the complexity and unpredictable nature of the school environment. In this environment, principals must adapt their leadership style to the circumstances rather than following a fixed approach (Bush & Glover, 2014: 567).

This approach is based on the idea that principals must respond to the particular organizational circumstances and challenges of the Organization, adapting their behavior to the needs of each situation (Leithwood et al., 1999: 15). This adaptive attitude requires leaders to be able to assess the situation and choose the most appropriate leadership response (Bush & Glover, 2014: 567).

Yukl (2002: 234) reinforces this view, noting that managerial work is often complex and unpredictable, and therefore, leaders need to constantly adapt their behavior based on specific circumstances. This approach emphasises that leadership cannot be based on predetermined solutions but requires constant evaluation and adaptation to prevailing circumstances. This is particularly critical in times of crisis, where leaders need to carefully analyse the situation and react appropriately rather than following a predetermined model of leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014: 564).

The contingent leadership model is considered pragmatic as it recognises the need to adapt leadership practices to specific circumstances and is not based on fixed values (Bush & Glover, 2014: 567). The complexity of the school environment requires principals to seek coordinated actions to achieve school goals (Muñoz et al., 2023: 42).

Participative Leadership

Participative leadership is characterised by the active participation of team members in the decision-making process. In the educational sector, this approach integrates all school community members into decision-making processes, promoting transparency and fostering a sense of collective responsibility among all stakeholders (Suherni et al., 2023: 496).

An inclusive leader emphasises consultation and shared decision-making, sharing power and encouraging democratic governance. This leadership style allows team members to express their opinions, which enhances their sense of appreciation from their superiors and improves relationships between principals and subordinates (Suherni et al., 2023: 498). Leaders who practice this style create an environment of cooperation and trust necessary to achieve educational goals (Ngotngamwong, 2012: 17-18).

In addition, participative leadership increases teachers' job satisfaction by improving the quality and effectiveness of decisions made (Ngotngamwong, 2012: 17-18). At the same time, it enhances creativity (Suherni et al., 2023: 499) and collaboration (Katsaros, 2008: 111) while boosting employee morale and reducing competition. Subordinates feel their opinions are valued and recognised as necessary in decision-making (Suherni et al., 2023: 499).

Teachers' participation in decision-making creates a sense of ownership, enhancing their commitment to the school's goals. Research has shown that this leadership model improves teachers' productivity,

trust and team spirit (Ngotngamwong, 2012: 18) while reducing pressure on principals as responsibilities are shared (Katsaros, 2008: 111).

However, despite its advantages, participative leadership can lead to time-consuming decision-making processes, thus reducing team effectiveness and productivity. In addition, conflicts and negative emotions may arise during discussions among school community members. Also, providing sensitive information to subordinates increases the risk of leaking this information outside the school environment (Suherni et al., 2023: 499-500).

Despite these challenges, participative leadership can meet the demands of modern organizations by facilitating more effective and efficient decision-making (Wang et al., 2022: 1, 10).

Conclusions

The analysis of various models of leadership in education reveals that no one leadership style is sufficient in itself (Saiti & Saitis, 2012: 268-269) to fully respond to the ever-changing social and educational challenges facing school units (Giasemis, 2016: 158). Each model has unique characteristics and advantages that contribute to effective leadership and limitations that can undermine the success of leadership in specific contexts. For example, administrative/managerial leadership offers clarity in structure and hierarchy but can limit creativity and adaptability. Similarly, instructional leadership focuses on improving learning outcomes but often overlooks other critical aspects of school life, such as student well-being.

Rather than focusing solely on one model, educational leaders can choose a synthetic approach combining several styles' strengths. Integrating elements of administrative leadership, which offers stability and structure, with transformational practices, which promote inspiration and innovation, can create a more flexible and adaptive form of leadership (Saiti & Saitis, 2012: 269). This approach allows principals to better adapt to the demands of an ever-evolving educational environment, where complexity and the speed of change require flexible and dynamic leadership skills.

In addition, distributed leadership and participative leadership can play an essential role in promoting collaboration and trust within the school community, while ethical leadership ensures that decisions are made with the moral integrity and well-being of all involved in mind. Contingent leadership enhances the adaptability of leaders, allowing them to choose the appropriate style depending on the circumstances, and transactional leadership provides tools for managing day-to-day operations and maintaining organization and order.

Ultimately, success in instructional leadership does not lie in the selection of a single style but in the ability of leaders to combine best practices from various approaches, creating a flexible and multi-dimensional model of leadership that adapts to the needs of the school and the larger community. This synthetic approach can catalyze improving education quality and educational organizations' success by effectively responding to the complex and multi-dimensional challenges of the contemporary educational environment.

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