

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS: A REVIEW OF INTERSECTING LEADERSHIP STYLES

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Abstract

This review examines the intersection of various leadership styles transformational, transactional, instructional, and servant leadership within educational settings over the past decade. By synthesizing empirical research findings, this paper explores how these leadership approaches converge to influence school effectiveness, school culture, teacher performance, and student achievement. Findings indicate that integrated or hybrid leadership frameworks are increasingly necessary to address the complex and dynamic demands of modern schooling. The intersection of leadership styles in education is not only theoretically compelling but practically essential. Leaders who can fluidly draw on transformational, transactional, instructional, and servant leadership behaviors are better equipped to build resilient, inclusive, and high-performing schools. The review highlights the need for integrated leadership models that adapt to diverse educational contexts and challenges. Future research should continue exploring how these intersections manifest in practice and how they influence long-term school development.

Keywords: Educational Leadership; Intersection Of Leadership Styles; School Contexts; Conceptual Review

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership has evolved significantly over the past decade, with various leadership styles being implemented to enhance school effectiveness. Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiring and motivating staff, has been widely studied for its impact on school culture and teacher performance. Transactional leadership, focusing on structured tasks and rewards, offers a contrasting approach. Instructional leadership emphasizes curriculum and pedagogy, while servant leadership prioritizes the development and well-being of staff. Understanding the intersections among these styles is crucial for developing comprehensive leadership frameworks that address the complexities of modern educational environments.

Over the past decade, educational leadership has witnessed a paradigm shift in response to the increasing complexity of teaching and learning environments, policy reforms, and accountability demands (Bush, 2020). As schools face multifaceted challenges—ranging from equity issues to technological integration leadership has emerged as a key determinant of school success and student achievement (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). In this context, multiple leadership styles have been theorized, implemented, and studied to understand their effectiveness in educational settings. Transformational leadership, popularized by Bass and Avolio (1994), has gained prominence in educational research for its emphasis on vision, motivation, and capacity-building. This leadership style inspires teachers by fostering shared goals, professional growth, and innovation, ultimately enhancing teacher commitment and school culture (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). In contrast, transactional leadership emphasizes maintaining order, compliance, and performance through structured processes, clear expectations, and contingent rewards or disciplinary actions (Podsakoff et al., 1990). While often criticized for lacking vision, it provides stability and clarity, especially in managing routine school operations.

Instructional leadership, rooted in the principal's role as an instructional guide, focuses on curriculum planning, teacher supervision, and student learning outcomes (Hallinger, 2005). It aligns leadership practices with pedagogical priorities and is widely recognized for its direct impact on classroom practices and academic achievement (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Servant leadership, conceptualized by Greenleaf (1977), shifts the leadership focus toward serving others especially teachers and students by promoting empathy, ethical behavior, and personal development. In schools, servant leaders build trusting relationships, nurture professional capacity, and prioritize the well-being of all members of the school community (Black, 2010). While each of these leadership styles contributes unique strengths, recent scholarship argues for a more integrated or hybrid approach. Given the interdependence of instructional effectiveness, teacher morale, organizational stability, and ethical leadership, understanding how these leadership styles intersect can inform the development of more adaptive, responsive, and holistic leadership models (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018). This conceptual review explores these intersections with the goal of synthesizing current research and proposing a more unified framework for educational leadership in the 21st century.

Method

This review employs a qualitative synthesis of empirical studies which had been published. The selected studies were identified through academic databases such as ERIC, Scopus, and Google Scholar, using keywords like "educational leadership," "transformational leadership," "transactional leadership," "instructional leadership," and "servant leadership." Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed articles or academic books, empirical studies, and conceptual papers that discuss the application and intersection of these leadership styles in educational settings. Studies focusing on primary, secondary, and higher education institutions were considered to provide a comprehensive overview. The review incorporated over 20 relevant studies, including both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The goal was not to compare styles competitively but to explore how they function in tandem or converge in practice.

Result

The landscape of educational leadership research over the past decade has demonstrated a growing interest in both individual and integrated leadership models. Scholars have increasingly emphasized the need to move beyond isolated leadership paradigms to better address the multifaceted demands of schools (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Gurr & Drysdale, 2018).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership remains one of the most studied models in education. Defined by its focus on inspiring and motivating others to achieve more than what is usually expected, transformational leadership includes four key components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In schools, transformational leaders enhance teacher engagement and organizational commitment, which in turn influence student performance (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Moreover, recent meta-analyses confirm its indirect yet significant impact on student learning through teacher mediation (Sun & Leithwood, 2017).

Transactional Leadership

Although often viewed as more managerial in nature, transactional leadership plays a stabilizing role in school systems. Transactional leaders focus on clarifying roles, establishing performance expectations, and rewarding or disciplining based on outcomes (Podsakoff et al., 1990). While it may not promote innovation, it is particularly effective in maintaining order and ensuring accountability (Klar, Huggins, Hammonds, & Buskey, 2016). Research suggests that when paired with transformational behaviors, transactional practices can enhance overall leadership efficacy (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is distinguished by its direct influence on teaching and learning. Principals acting as instructional leaders prioritize academic goals, monitor classroom instruction, and support professional development (Hallinger, 2005). Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) found that instructional leadership had the strongest effect on student outcomes when compared to other leadership types. More recently, scholars have advocated for distributed instructional leadership—where leadership responsibilities are shared among staff—as a means of sustaining instructional quality in larger or more complex schools (Ng, 2020).

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, grounded in the ethic of care, promotes leadership as a form of service rather than control. In educational contexts, servant leaders support the emotional and professional well-being of teachers and students, fostering trust and collaboration (Greenleaf, 1977; Black, 2010). This approach has been linked to stronger teacher morale, reduced burnout, and enhanced community relationships (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019).

Intersecting Leadership Styles

While traditionally studied in isolation, a growing body of literature suggests that combining leadership styles offers more adaptive and context-sensitive solutions. For example, Day et al. (2016) argue that effective leaders often exhibit a repertoire of leadership behaviors depending on situational demands. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) also emphasize that successful school leaders adaptively integrate transformational, instructional, and even transactional strategies to navigate complexity.

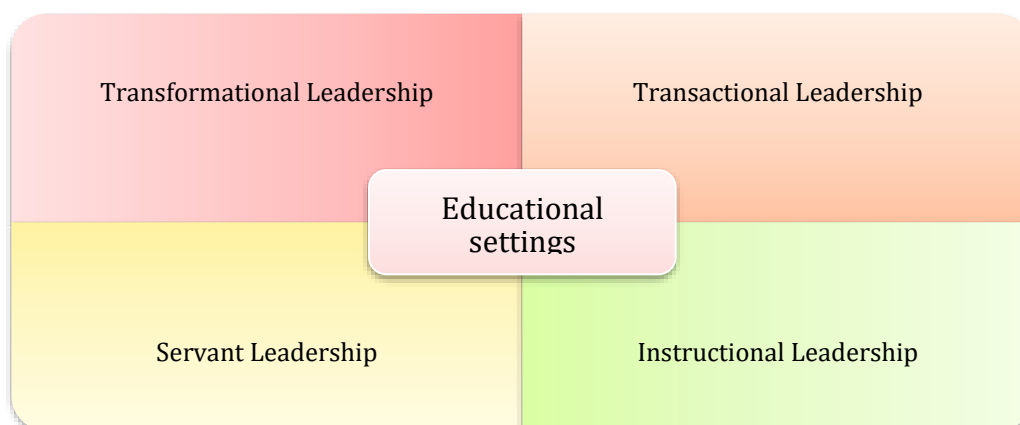


Figure 1 Intersection of Leadership Styles in Educational Settings

The intersection of transformational and instructional leadership is particularly compelling, as it links vision-driven change with direct pedagogical improvements (Hallinger, 2011). Similarly, servant leadership complements instructional leadership by fostering the trust and relational capital needed to implement instructional reforms successfully (Williams, 2019). This conceptual convergence suggests a shift toward more holistic and flexible leadership models that respond to the evolving challenges in education.

The synthesis of selected studies reveals several key intersections among leadership styles in educational settings:

1. **Transformational and Instructional Leadership:** Studies indicate that transformational leaders who engage in instructional leadership practices can foster a collaborative school culture that enhances teaching quality and student outcomes. For instance, Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) found that transformational leadership positively influences school culture and student achievement.
2. **Transactional and Transformational Leadership:** While transformational leadership is associated with long-term vision and change, transactional leadership provides the structure and accountability necessary for implementing such changes effectively. A study by Bass and Avolio (1994) suggests that a balance between these styles can lead to optimal outcomes in educational settings.
3. **Servant Leadership and Teacher Development:** Servant leadership, which emphasizes the growth and well-being of staff, intersects with instructional leadership by creating an environment conducive to professional development. Greenleaf (1977) posited that servant leadership fosters a supportive atmosphere that enhances teacher performance and student learning.
4. **Contextual Adaptation:** The effectiveness of these leadership styles is contingent upon contextual factors such as school culture, community involvement, and resource availability. Studies by Hallinger (2011) and Leithwood et al. (2004) highlight the importance of adapting leadership approaches to fit the specific needs of the educational context.

Table 1 Intersection among Leadership Styles

Intersection	Findings
Transformational + Instructional	When vision-driven leadership is coupled with pedagogy-focused practices, schools benefit from both innovation and instructional quality (Sun & Leithwood, 2017).
Transactional + Transformational	Accountability from transactional strategies reinforces long-term goals of transformational leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).
Servant + Instructional	Trust and relational capital from servant leadership create conditions for instructional changes to succeed (Williams, 2019).
Contextual Adaptation	Leadership effectiveness is highly context-dependent, requiring dynamic and hybrid models suited to specific school needs (Hallinger, 2011; Ng, 2020).

Discussion

The intersection of various leadership styles in educational settings underscores the complexity of effective school leadership. An integrated approach that combines elements of transformational, transactional, instructional, and servant leadership can address the

multifaceted challenges faced by educational institutions. For example, a leader who inspires and motivates (transformational), provides clear expectations (transactional), focuses on teaching and learning (instructional), and supports staff development (servant) is likely to create a thriving educational environment. Furthermore, the adaptability of leadership styles to the specific context of a school is crucial. Leaders must assess their school's unique needs and challenges and apply appropriate leadership strategies accordingly. This contextual sensitivity ensures that leadership practices are relevant and effective in achieving desired educational outcomes.

The findings from the literature reveal that while each leadership style—transformational, transactional, instructional, and servant—has distinct attributes and theoretical roots, their combined application often leads to more effective school leadership. This convergence reflects a growing consensus in the field that rigid adherence to a single style may no longer suffice in the face of increasingly complex educational environments (Leithwood et al., 2020; Gurr & Drysdale, 2018).

The Case for Integrative Leadership Models

Schools are multifaceted organizations that require leaders to adapt flexibly to shifting circumstances, such as curriculum reforms, inclusion policies, teacher shortages, and student mental health concerns. An integrative leadership model, blending features of multiple styles, provides the agility necessary for effective decision-making and sustained school improvement (Day et al., 2016). For instance, transformational leadership can motivate change and create a compelling school vision, while instructional leadership ensures that such a vision translates into concrete pedagogical strategies. Simultaneously, transactional leadership reinforces accountability, and servant leadership fosters a supportive school culture.

Complementary Roles of Leadership Styles

Research suggests that the interplay among leadership styles is not merely additive but synergistic. For example, transformational leadership's emphasis on shared vision can be more effectively realized when supported by the goal-oriented structure of transactional leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Similarly, the moral grounding of servant leadership complements the technical orientation of instructional leadership, ensuring that academic excellence does not come at the expense of teacher and student well-being (Eva et al., 2019). This synergy is evident in leadership practices where school principals alternate between instructional and transformational roles, guiding curriculum while also empowering teachers to innovate (Sun & Leithwood, 2017). In such cases, the integration of styles enhances organizational coherence, teacher collaboration, and professional development.

Contextual and Cultural Considerations

While integrated models hold great promise, their effectiveness is deeply influenced by contextual variables, including school size, socio-economic environment, policy frameworks, and cultural expectations (Hallinger, 2011; Ng, 2020). For example, in low-performing schools facing high levels of teacher turnover, transactional leadership might be necessary initially to stabilize performance, followed by transformational and servant strategies to build long-term capacity and morale. In contrast, high-performing schools with experienced staff may benefit more from distributed instructional leadership and professional autonomy. Moreover, leadership effectiveness is also shaped by national and local cultural norms. Servant leadership may resonate more strongly in collectivist cultures that value community and relational

harmony, whereas transformational leadership may align with systems emphasizing individual achievement and innovation (Hofstede, 2011).

Implications for Leadership Development

These findings suggest that leadership training programs should shift from promoting fixed leadership models toward fostering adaptive expertise. Aspiring school leaders should be equipped to analyze their contexts, select appropriate leadership strategies, and integrate elements from different styles. This capacity for situational judgment and behavioral flexibility is critical for navigating the dynamic demands of modern schooling (Robinson et al., 2008; Bush, 2020). Furthermore, professional development should include reflective practices and mentoring that allow leaders to evaluate the ethical, instructional, and relational dimensions of their leadership. Supporting this shift will also require structural reforms in policy and accountability systems that currently reward rigid compliance over innovative or human-centered leadership.

The intersections of leadership styles offer a compelling framework for understanding how effective school leaders operate in multifaceted environments. As educational settings become more dynamic and unpredictable, no single leadership model is sufficient. Instead, leaders must develop adaptive expertise, the ability to integrate elements from multiple leadership styles based on situational demands (Day et al., 2016).

Integrated leadership practices bring multiple benefits: they balance vision with accountability, pedagogy with ethics, and innovation with structure. For instance, transformational leadership inspires change, but instructional leadership ensures that change improves learning outcomes. Similarly, servant leadership supports teacher well-being, which in turn influences professional performance. However, implementation of hybrid leadership must be sensitive to contextual factors, including school demographics, culture, policy constraints, and leadership capacity. What works in one school may not translate effectively to another. This reinforces the importance of situational judgment and flexible leadership frameworks (Hallinger, 2011).

In sum, the discussion confirms that the intersection of leadership styles in education is not only theoretically compelling but practically essential. Leaders who can fluidly draw on transformational, transactional, instructional, and servant leadership behaviors are better equipped to build resilient, inclusive, and high-performing schools. Future research should continue exploring how these intersections manifest in practice and how they influence long-term school development.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual review has explored the intersections among four major leadership styles transformational, transactional, instructional, and servant leadership in educational settings. While each style brings unique strengths, recent research underscores the value of blending these approaches to meet the complex demands of modern schooling. The literature demonstrates that integrated leadership models not only enhance instructional quality and school performance but also promote teacher well-being, ethical governance, and sustained organizational growth. The synergy between leadership styles allows school leaders to respond more effectively to varied educational contexts. For instance, transformational and instructional leadership together drive both vision and pedagogy, while servant and transactional leadership contribute to a balanced environment of support and accountability. As educational institutions continue to confront evolving challenges ranging from curriculum

reform to equity, mental health, and technology integration leadership agility and adaptability are more critical than ever. Understanding and applying the intersection of leadership styles enables leaders to build school cultures that are both aspirational and practical where visionary goals are met through effective teaching, and where community values are aligned with high academic expectations. This review affirms that the most effective educational leadership does not rely on a single paradigm but arises from a thoughtful synthesis of styles. Integrating transformational, transactional, instructional, and servant leadership allows school leaders to respond holistically to the needs of their communities. These hybrid approaches contribute to improved instruction, stronger school climates, higher staff morale, and better student outcomes.

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