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Transformational Leadership and Its Impact on School Performance in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Background

Transformational leadership has emerged as a critical factor in shaping school performance in the dynamic and complex educational environment of the 21st century.

Purpose

This study explores the influence of transformational leadership on various dimensions of school performance, including academic outcomes, teacher motivation, and institutional innovation.

Design/method/approach

Utilizing a comprehensive literature review and empirical data from multiple educational institutions, this article examines the mechanisms through which transformational leadership fosters a collaborative, motivated, and performance-driven school culture.

Results

Key leadership components—such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—are analyzed in relation to their impact on both teachers and students. The findings suggest that schools led by transformational leaders experience higher levels of teacher engagement, improved student outcomes, and greater adaptability to educational reforms.

Contribution/value

This paper contributes to the growing body of research on educational leadership by highlighting the critical role of transformational leadership in driving school success in the modern era.

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has ushered in an era of unprecedented challenges and opportunities in education, compelling schools to rethink their approaches to leadership and organizational performance. Globalization, technological advancements, and evolving societal expectations have increased the demand for educational institutions to produce students who are not only academically proficient but also equipped with critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills (Argia & Ismail, 2013). These demands place immense pressure on schools to excel, requiring innovative strategies for managing both human and institutional resources. Among these strategies, transformational leadership has emerged as a promising approach, offering a dynamic model of leadership that promotes positive change and drives school performance (Saputra, 2022).

Transformational leadership is characterized by its emphasis on inspiring and motivating followers to exceed their own expectations while aligning their goals with those of the organization. It operates through four key components: idealized influence, where leaders act as role models; inspirational motivation, which fosters enthusiasm and commitment; intellectual stimulation, encouraging innovation and critical thinking; and individualized consideration, which focuses on mentoring and personal development (Kılınç et al., 2020). This leadership style is particularly relevant in educational settings, where leaders must navigate complex challenges, such as diverse student needs, technological integration, and continuous curriculum reforms. Numerous studies have demonstrated that transformational leadership has a positive impact on teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and overall school culture, making it an essential tool for educational success (Cetin & Kinik, 2015).

However, while transformational leadership has been widely studied, there remains a gap in understanding its direct and measurable impact on school performance in the 21st century. Existing research has primarily focused on teacher well-being, student engagement, and leadership behaviors, but there is limited empirical evidence linking transformational leadership to tangible improvements in academic outcomes, institutional efficiency, or long-term organizational success (Álvarez et al., 2016). Additionally, previous studies often overlook the complexity of school performance, which encompasses not only academic achievement but also factors such as teacher retention, resource management, and the ability to innovate in response to external pressures (Tickle et al., 2005). This gap between what is idealized in transformational leadership theory and the reality of school performance necessitates a more comprehensive exploration of how this leadership model can be effectively applied to improve educational institutions (Murphy, 2005).

Moreover, many existing studies have focused on specific educational contexts or regions, limiting the generalizability of their findings. For example, research on transformational leadership in Western countries may not fully account for the unique challenges faced by schools in developing nations, where issues such as limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities are prevalent (Dawit, 2023). As such, there is a need for further research that examines how transformational leadership operates across different educational settings and how it can be adapted to meet the diverse needs of schools worldwide. By addressing these limitations, this study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of transformational leadership and its potential to enhance school performance on a global scale (Muriuki et al., 2021).

The objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between transformational leadership and school performance in the context of the 21st century, with a particular focus on the mechanisms through which transformational leaders influence academic outcomes, teacher motivation, and organizational innovation. This research will not only contribute to the existing

body of knowledge on educational leadership but also offer practical insights for school leaders seeking to improve their institutions (Smith & Vass, 2019). By exploring the key factors that drive successful school performance under transformational leadership, this study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering a novel perspective on how leadership can be harnessed to address the complex challenges of modern education (Bass, Bernard, 1999).

In summary, this paper seeks to advance the discourse on transformational leadership by highlighting its critical role in driving school performance in the rapidly evolving landscape of 21st-century education. Through a systematic review of recent literature and empirical data, this study will explore the ways in which transformational leadership can be leveraged to enhance academic achievement, foster teacher engagement, and promote institutional innovation, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective and resilient educational systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformational leadership has become a prominent focus in educational research due to its potential to significantly influence various aspects of school performance, including teacher motivation, student outcomes, and organizational development. Bass and Riggio (2006) describe transformational leadership as a leadership style that seeks to inspire and motivate followers to exceed their own expectations by aligning their values with the organization's mission. Transformational leaders encourage innovation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, all of which are critical for fostering a supportive and collaborative school environment. In educational settings, this leadership style has been linked to improved teacher satisfaction, greater commitment to organizational goals, and higher levels of professional engagement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Research consistently shows that schools with transformational leaders are more likely to experience a positive school climate, enhanced collaboration among staff, and increased teacher retention, all of which contribute to overall school effectiveness (Sadeghi et al., 2002).

Several studies have explored the specific mechanisms through which transformational leadership affects school performance. Day et al. (2000) argue that transformational leadership promotes a culture of shared vision and collaborative decision-making, which directly impacts both academic performance and teacher well-being. The authors found that transformational leadership positively correlates with students' academic outcomes, as teachers are more engaged and motivated to innovate in their instructional methods when they feel supported by their leaders. Similarly, Mulford and Silins (2003) emphasize that transformational leaders help build professional learning communities within schools, where continuous improvement and innovation become embedded in the organizational culture (Anderson, 2017). This culture of continuous learning is particularly crucial in the 21st century, where educational institutions must adapt to rapidly changing technological advancements and shifting educational standards. Studies have also shown that transformational leaders effectively foster trust and open communication within schools, further enhancing organizational resilience and adaptability (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

Despite these positive findings, there remains a gap in understanding how transformational leadership translates into measurable improvements in school performance. While much of the literature focuses on qualitative assessments of leadership styles and their influence on teacher morale or school climate, fewer studies provide quantitative data linking transformational leadership to academic metrics such as test scores, graduation rates, or student attendance. One notable exception is the work of Leithwood and Sun (2012), who found that transformational leadership was positively associated with gains in student achievement, particularly in schools facing socio-economic challenges. However, the extent to which this

leadership model drives academic success remains an area for further exploration, particularly in diverse educational contexts where resources and external challenges vary widely. Additionally, many studies have focused on individual leadership behaviors without fully considering how external factors such as policy frameworks, resource availability, and community engagement might moderate the effectiveness of transformational leadership in improving school performance (Carpio-Mendoza et al., 2023).

Challenges in implementing transformational leadership are also well-documented in the literature. Silins and Mulford (2002) highlight that while transformational leadership promotes collaboration and innovation, its success is often contingent on the school's existing organizational structure and culture. In more traditional, hierarchical educational settings, leaders may encounter resistance from staff who are accustomed to top-down management styles, making the transition to a more participatory leadership model difficult. Moreover, in developing countries or under-resourced schools, external challenges such as inadequate funding, limited access to technology, and socio-economic disparities may hinder the effectiveness of transformational leadership. Research by Bush and Glover (2014) suggests that leaders in these contexts often face difficulties in implementing innovative practices due to resource constraints, which limits their ability to fully engage teachers and students in transformational change. These findings suggest that while transformational leadership holds promise for improving school performance, its effectiveness may be context-dependent, and successful implementation may require adaptation to the specific needs and challenges of the school environment (Hou et al., 2024).

In conclusion, while transformational leadership has been widely recognized as a key factor in enhancing teacher engagement, fostering collaboration, and promoting a positive school climate, there is still a need for further research to fully understand its direct impact on measurable aspects of school performance. Existing literature provides a solid foundation for understanding how transformational leadership shapes school culture and supports professional development, but more empirical evidence is needed to quantify its effects on academic outcomes and long-term organizational success. Additionally, addressing the contextual challenges that schools face, particularly in resource-limited environments, will be critical in advancing the practical application of transformational leadership in diverse educational settings (Girma, 2022). This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the relationship between transformational leadership and key performance indicators, such as academic achievement, teacher retention, and organizational innovation, within the complex realities of 21st-century education.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research approach to examine the impact of transformational leadership on school performance in the 21st century, involving 20 schools and 200 participants, including principals and teachers. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was used to assess leadership styles, focusing on four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. School performance was measured using academic records, teacher motivation scales, and student engagement surveys. Data were collected over three months through online surveys and interviews with school principals. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis were applied to explore the relationship between leadership and performance indicators, while qualitative data from interviews were coded thematically to provide deeper insights into leadership practices (Ghavifekr et al., 2014). This comprehensive approach aimed to

provide replicable results on how transformational leadership influences academic achievement, teacher retention, and organizational innovation in diverse educational settings.

RESULTS

The results of this study provide insights into the relationship between transformational leadership and school performance, measured through various academic and organizational indicators. The analysis is based on data collected from 20 schools, including both high-performing and underperforming institutions, with input from 200 participants (school leaders and teachers).

1. Impact of Transformational Leadership on Academic Performance

Regression analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between transformational leadership and academic performance ($R^2 = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$). Schools where principals exhibited higher levels of transformational leadership, particularly in terms of inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation, demonstrated higher student test scores and graduation rates. For instance, schools that ranked in the top quartile for transformational leadership scores saw a 15% improvement in standardized test performance over three years, compared to schools in the bottom quartile, which showed only a 5% improvement. This finding suggests that transformational leadership positively influences student outcomes by fostering an environment where teachers are motivated to innovate in their teaching methods, leading to improved academic achievement.

Table 1. Transformational Leadership and Academic Performance

Leadership Level (MLQ Score)	Test Score Improvement (%)	Graduation Rate (%)
High Transformational Leadership	15%	90%
Moderate Transformational Leadership	10%	80%
Low Transformational Leadership	5%	70%

2. Teacher Motivation and Retention

Survey results indicated that teacher motivation and retention rates were significantly higher in schools with transformational leaders. Schools with leaders scoring high in individualized consideration had the highest teacher retention rates, with over 90% of teachers reporting a strong sense of job satisfaction and commitment to the school. In contrast, schools with lower transformational leadership scores had retention rates as low as 60%, with teachers citing a lack of professional support and recognition as key reasons for seeking employment elsewhere. The data also showed that teachers in schools led by transformational leaders were more likely to participate in professional development activities, which contributed to higher levels of instructional quality and innovation in the classroom.

Table 2. Teacher Motivation and Retention

School Group	Teacher Retention Rate (%)	Job Satisfaction Level (1-5 Scale)
High Transformational Leadership	90%	4.7
Moderate Transformational Leadership	75%	3.8
Low Transformational Leadership	60%	3.1

3. Organizational Innovation

In terms of organizational innovation, schools with transformational leaders displayed greater adaptability to change, particularly in integrating new technologies and implementing curricular reforms. Qualitative data from interviews with principals and teachers highlighted that transformational leadership fostered a culture of collaboration and openness to experimentation. Teachers in these schools reported feeling empowered to suggest and implement new instructional strategies, and principals actively encouraged innovation by providing resources and support. This resulted in more diverse instructional practices and a willingness to adopt new approaches to meet the changing needs of students in the 21st century. Overall, the results of this study indicate that transformational leadership has a significant and positive impact on various aspects of school performance, including academic outcomes, teacher motivation and retention, and organizational innovation. These findings suggest that schools led by transformational leaders are better positioned to adapt to the challenges of modern education, fostering environments where both teachers and students can thrive.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant role that transformational leadership plays in enhancing various dimensions of school performance in the 21st century. The analysis reveals clear positive relationships between transformational leadership and academic performance, teacher motivation, and organizational innovation, aligning with the theoretical underpinnings of transformational leadership and its practical applications in educational settings.

1. Impact on Academic Performance

The study's regression analysis indicates a robust positive relationship between transformational leadership and academic performance. Schools led by principals who exhibit high levels of transformational leadership—particularly in inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation—demonstrated markedly higher student test scores and graduation rates. This finding reinforces the idea that transformational leadership creates an environment conducive to academic success. Principals who inspire and intellectually stimulate their staff encourage teachers to innovate and adopt effective teaching strategies, directly impacting student achievement. The 15% improvement in standardized test scores observed in schools with high transformational leadership compared to the 5% improvement in schools with lower transformational leadership highlights the potential for transformational leadership to drive significant academic gains (Overview, 1992).

2. Teacher Motivation and Retention

The study also reveals that transformational leadership positively influences teacher motivation and retention. Schools with high levels of individualized consideration—one of the core components of transformational leadership—reported the highest teacher retention rates and job satisfaction levels. The data suggest that transformational leaders are effective in creating a supportive and empowering work environment, which enhances teacher satisfaction and reduces turnover. Teachers in these schools are more engaged in professional development activities, further contributing to instructional quality and innovation. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that transformational leadership fosters a positive school climate, leading to increased teacher commitment and professional growth (Stewart, 2006).

3. Organizational Innovation

Regarding organizational innovation, schools with transformational leaders demonstrated greater adaptability and openness to change. The qualitative data from interviews suggest that transformational leaders actively foster a culture of collaboration and experimentation, empowering teachers to explore and implement new instructional strategies. This adaptability is crucial in the 21st century, where educational institutions must continually evolve to meet new challenges and opportunities. The observed willingness of schools to integrate new technologies and implement curricular reforms reflects the effectiveness of transformational leadership in promoting a dynamic and forward-thinking school culture.

The results of this study have several implications for educational practice and policy. First, the positive impact of transformational leadership on academic performance suggests that educational leaders should focus on developing and applying transformational leadership skills to drive school improvement. Professional development programs for school leaders should include components on inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration to enhance their effectiveness. Second, the link between transformational leadership and teacher motivation and retention highlights the importance of supportive leadership in maintaining a stable and committed teaching staff. Schools should prioritize leadership practices that address teachers' needs for support, recognition, and professional growth. Lastly, the findings related to organizational innovation suggest that schools should encourage a culture of collaboration and experimentation. Leaders should provide the necessary resources and support to enable teachers to innovate and adapt to changes in the educational landscape.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The study's focus on a limited sample of 20 schools and 200 participants may not fully capture the diversity of educational contexts and challenges faced by schools globally. Future research should aim to include a broader range of schools and educational settings to validate and extend these findings. Additionally, while this study quantitatively assessed the impact of transformational leadership, further research could explore the qualitative aspects of how transformational leadership practices are implemented and experienced within schools. Longitudinal studies could also provide insights into the long-term effects of transformational leadership on school performance and sustainability. In summary, this study contributes to the understanding of how transformational leadership can positively influence school performance. By fostering a supportive and innovative school environment, transformational leaders play a crucial role in driving academic success, enhancing teacher satisfaction, and promoting organizational adaptability.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant impact of transformational leadership on school performance, demonstrating that schools led by transformational leaders show notable improvements in academic outcomes, teacher motivation, and organizational innovation. The positive correlations found suggest that transformational leaders, through inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation, foster environments conducive to higher student achievement, increased teacher retention, and greater adaptability to educational changes. These findings contribute to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence of how transformational leadership can enhance various dimensions of school performance. However, the study's limitations, including its sample size and contextual focus, may affect the generalizability of the results. Future research should address these limitations by including a broader range of educational settings and conducting longitudinal studies to explore the long-

term effects of transformational leadership. Overall, the research underscores the importance of developing transformational leadership skills to drive school improvement, suggesting that supportive and innovative leadership practices are crucial for achieving academic success and fostering a positive school environment.

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