

# **Teacher Leadership as Distributed and Transformational Leadership in Higher Education**

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### **Introduction:**

Recent research and literature on educational leadership within institutions such as universities have mainly focused on the analyses of different concepts, practices, and models. Despite the many studies on educational leadership, few of them have attempted to evaluate the effect of different leadership concepts on educational outcomes regarding governance, performance, and conflict management. In this case, the issues of leadership within a classroom environment in higher institutions are not well researched due to lack of models to allow distributed leadership within education institutions. It is seen that less than 30 of the available literature and published studies in educational leadership have presented a direct link between student outcomes and leadership within higher institutions. The limited research has therefore prevented an informed promotion and the adoption of leadership models and concepts in education. This is due to the reason that policy makers do not have enough evidence that can be the foundation for the total support of certain approaches to leadership.

In this case, a critical analysis of the available research is presented to provide an overview of the available leadership models and how they can be applied to universities. Two contemporary leadership theories are analyzed, transformational leadership and distributed leadership, based on their application in a classroom environment through teachers. Due to limited research available on higher institution leadership models. The

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research applies models from school based leadership. Thus, a review of journal articles, books, and reports on educational leadership is presented to analyze the two theories and their effects on educational outcomes. It mainly focuses on student performances in universities and addresses the limitations to having a successful teacher leadership and their outcomes when applied. Further, a critical evaluation is done to understand the contribution of the theories to the improvement of institutions performance through examining their weaknesses and limitations within universities. This is because most available research has concentrated on the lower school systems such as nurseries and kindergarten. In this context, a synthesis of available research is presented while identifying the gaps in research on the same, which serves as the foundation for conclusions.

### **Research Aims and Objectives:**

The main aim of the research is to understand teacher leadership and its application in a classroom organization. Further, the research is also aimed at analyzing the various concepts behind distributed leadership and how learning institutions are capable of adopting it to achieve change and transformation. In this case, some of the key objectives include:

- To critically analyze the characteristics of an effective transformational leadership within a classroom context.
- To evaluate the limitations of teacher leadership development.
- To present a classroom as a model of an organization.

### **Research Questions:**

The research has been done through analyzing theories related to education leadership. It has been guided by

different questions to fully achieve the aims set. Therefore, the questions are:

- How can teachers and lecturers be developed to become effective leaders in their schools?
- Is distributed leadership a good approach to achieving good performance and an effective schooling system?
- What are the main characteristics of an effective transformational and classroom leadership?
- How can teacher leadership be applied as a reform strategy to improve the school systems and encourage transformational change?
- How can one view a classroom as an organization?

The research is literature based and involves comparing and analyzing existing work of other authors and how they have applied methods and results to have a clear understanding of the topic. Theories and concepts have been applied to analyze and understand the different leadership concepts and systems available within the school institutions. Such include the transformational theories, traditional trait, and situational styles. In understanding the theoretical origins of distributed leadership, several key concepts have been cited such as the

### **Research Limitations:**

The research has applied school based projects and studies to bring a clear understanding of the classrooms in the universities. However, the concepts found in school classrooms are not the same as those found within university classrooms. It will not be possible to get a clear picture of the classroom as an organization from analyzing school research. According to Northcote (2009), it is evident that higher education settings differ significantly with the school settings. This calls for more research to be done within the higher education to get a clear view of the concepts applied by teachers in classrooms. This is because

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university classrooms are different in many aspects such as size, contact time with the lecturers, student responsibility, culture, and study approach. Due to these differences, the leadership approaches applied in both contexts differs in a significant way.

### **Justification of the Research:**

There are reasons why the school-based research is applied in this study, one being that there is limited research that has been done in higher education. Van Niekerk (2005) investigates transformational leadership within higher education and from the literature review; it is evident that many questions are left unanswered as to how lecturers can be transformational leaders. However, the results indicate that the most common leadership style within higher education is transformational. Therefore, further research is required to understand this concept and how colleges and universities can be perceived as organizations. Based on the results of the study, additional proposals are required regarding more research in the subject of transformational leadership. It is also required to highlight possible decisions regarding the human resource for higher education (Van Niekerk, 2005).

According to Black (2015), it is clear that the leadership in higher education has continued to be placed under research due to the changes in the system. This includes the expansion of student numbers, globalization of the education sector, increased marketization, and differences in student choices. As for the schools, students do not often have a choice when it comes to subject selection. Therefore, the research is significant as higher education institutions are expected to evaluate how to develop their leaders. This requires different ways through which this can be a success. Therefore, it is important to understand what might be the

most appropriate behaviour for institutions to adapt the new characteristics.

### **Distributed Leadership in Universities: Theories**

The aspect of distributed leadership is presented to have been applied for the first time by Bolden, Petrov, and Gosling (2009, p.4), who drew attention to the several dynamics of influential processes and how they impact on the performance of different groups. In another case, Menon (2015, p.3) suggests that leadership should not be approached as a monopoly of an individual but as a shared responsibility of different individuals. This argument can be applied in a university setting in which leadership should be distributed among all the heads of faculties to achieve good governance. The notion that leadership is best taken as a group quality other than an individual's work has gradually become accepted in the field of education and not just in business organizations. Bolden (2011, p.252) defines distributed leadership as a leadership concept of the moment while on the other hand, Edwards (2007, p.23) defines it as the new approach within institutions. This shows that the concept has only currently started being adopted into the existing leadership systems. However, many factors have limited its applicability such as lack of skills and support knowledge.

Bolden, Petrov, and Gosling (2009, p.5) present findings from their research based on 12 United Kingdom Universities where they sought to capture an analysis and concepts on distributed leadership. Their main aim was to reveal the most common experiences that limit the application of leadership within and between institutions. The analysis of their findings shows that they identified two key approaches to the application and distribution of leadership in higher education. They identified two approaches; emergent, which is associated with horizontal

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and bottom-up influence and the devolved approach associated with the bottom down influence.

A critical analysis of educational administration literature reveals that the aspect of distributed leadership has been accepted with enthusiasm in different institutions by teachers, students, and heads of faculties. There are two popular interpretations of distributed leadership theory. One interpretation by Lowery-Moore, Latimer and Villate (2016, p.4) refers to overall leadership as transformational and as a distributed practice. They draw a conclusion on the work related to cognitive psychology that puts emphasis on distributed cognition and the key role of a social context as the main influence on human behaviour and learning. This can be applied in a class environment to determine whether teacher leadership can be useful in improving students' performance and social behaviour. In many cases, teachers are only viewed as teaching tools and their ability to lead is questioned (Shelton 2012, p.22).

Within organizations, formal and informal groups are seen to interact constantly. In the case of a class organization, teachers interact constantly with students, which make them the most appropriate subjects to lead. They result in certain patterns of action, communication, and learning that allow sharing of ideas. However, the interaction between lecturers and students has not been fully presented in research. Less is understood about the contact time, student response, and culture. Therefore, in this context, distributed leadership is applicable as it emerges as a shared norm by individuals seeking to address institutional problems and issues (Strong-Rhoads 2011, p.253). This can be best applied in a class context as most students are unable to present their issues to institutional heads as they exercise excessive authority and are unapproachable. Within an institution, lecturers are



considered to practice distributed leadership when, for example, they take part in taking initiatives towards specific problems (Lang 2011, p.7).

### **Transformational Leadership:**

Pounder (2005, p.2) defines transformational leadership as leadership that is applied within organizations to cause a change in social societies, individuals, and systems. In this case, it causes positive changes within its followers with an end goal of developing them into good leaders. This approach can be applied within education institutions and among teachers to have an effective class leadership. Therefore, transformational leadership is seen to enhance performance, morale, motivation, and output of its followers (Harris 2013, p.14). This should be adopted within organizations, especially in higher education to improve performance among the existing employees such as teachers and heads of faculties. According to Givens (2008, p.5), this kind of leadership is used to connect the participants by allowing them to have a sense of belonging, identify the goals of the organizations, and be good ambassadors of change. McCloskey (2015, p.2) first analyzed the concept of transformational leadership in a descriptive research that was based on political leaders. However, the approach is now applied in organizational psychology. According to Bass and Avolio (1993, p.113), a transforming leadership is a process that allows leaders and juniors to assist each other to improve regarding results and motivation.

There exists difficulty in differentiating between leadership and management where the differences occur in behaviours and characteristics. In this case, Edwards (2007, p.24) and Hallinger (2003, p.331) acknowledge that transformational leadership creates a significant change in characteristics of people and organizations. This kind of

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leadership redesigns values, morals, and perceptions of the employees. Unlike the transactional approach used by many organizations, transformational leadership is based on personality, ability to make a change, and traits (Edwards 2007, p.24). Transforming leaders are seen to relate well with an organization's system in advocating for a change, using resources, and setting goals. They work towards the benefit of a team or an institution, community, or organization. This differs with transactional leaders who do not strive for change and performance in the respective organization.

In Bolkan, Goodboy, and Griffin's (2011, p.338) study, they indicate that the teacher leader subjects indicated certain leadership qualities that are more transformational. In this case, they tend to have a wide commitment to a variety of values that they follow and communicate openly. All the teacher leaders studied in the research by Noland and Richards (2014, p.6-7) displayed some level of enthusiasm that was seen to be contagious. They also had the ability to inspire the students and also raise their expectations. Some of the reviews done to explain transformational leadership indicate that teacher leaders have a liking towards transformational agendas. Therefore, Balyer (2012, p.582) and Leithwood and Jantzi (2006, p.6) describe teacher leaders as nurturers of good relationships, encouragers of change, models of growth, and key challengers of a status quo. Teachers have the ability to transform students to become future leaders by enacting good behaviour and communicating ways to achieve goals.

### **Classrooms as Organizations:**

The argument on the viability of a transformational leadership to a class setting depends on the aspect that a classroom can be treated as a quasi-organization. This approach is important and is applied in the research to

understand the effects of teacher leadership traits and characteristics on students. However, Bolden (2011, p.253) is a critic of this as he states that students are not subordinates in a true sense but can be viewed as paying clients. If his view is accepted, it will not reinforce the importance of a transformational classroom leadership as a factor that influences students. Some researchers have advocated that classrooms should be used in modelling the issues that are commonly experienced in a conventional organization.

Teachers provide the most efficient leaderships strategies within classroom organizations as they impact the behaviours portrayed by students (Givens 2008, p.20). The characteristics they exhibit as leaders affect different students and their outcomes. According to Zepeda (2013, p.16), teacher leadership has gained a lot of support in the literature and writings from various sources and has been explored by different scholars. The main approaches they have taken are that it relates to a specific type of classroom that is perceived to be an organization. In this case, the organization is composed of students from different backgrounds who exhibit different characteristics in form of behaviour and performance. The best classroom management style has been perceived to be transformational leadership. Based on the work of Given (2008, p.12), this is referred to as a combination of three behaviours. These include the ability to inspire others, which is known as charismatic leadership, the ability to work with subordinates to meet their core needs, and the need to encourage problem solving and creativity (Shelton 2012, p.25). These aspects are mostly observed in a classroom setting, which makes this kind of leadership most applicable in a class. Students need to be motivated through developing their talents.

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Intellectual stimulation is part of transformational leadership and should be applied in a class to allow students to succeed in their studies. This is backed up by individualized consideration, which involves approaching every student on a personal level to understand their needs. The leadership focuses on transforming and moving followers to achieve and focus on what is expected of them. It helps in building an intrinsic motivation and hard work in different subordinates. The concept has been applied to the field of a college learning environment as teachers, just like organizational leaders, have the capability of transforming the characteristic of a classroom. In a classroom, the leadership concept is seen to correlate with different learning outcomes such as cognitive learning, state motivation, student participation, effective learning, and student perceptions towards the credibility of the teacher. The leadership has also been linked to instructional outcomes such as perceived instructor effectiveness and more effort within their studies. According to Lang (2011, p.8), different aspects of transformational leadership exist within organizations. However, scholars have failed to identify the main behaviours exhibited by students that can be perceived as being transformational in the context of a university classroom.

To correct this gap, Burgess & Newton (2014, p.67) conducted a study with a key aim of creating a behavioural measure of the transformational leadership in a classroom organization. Based on results from a previous setting, they concluded that although different measures exist that explain the different behaviours portrayed by students, many were perceived as charismatic, and indicated an individualized consideration. Further, a good measure of intellectual stimulation was seen to have been missing from the available literature. Therefore, they developed a reliable

scale that could measure the behavioural characteristics and indicators of any intellectual stimulation. This involved challenging students, applying an interactive teaching style, and encouraging the need for an independent thought. Most important, the results from this study indicated that teachers who promote intellectual stimulation encourage students and initiate cognitive and effective learning. The study towards intellectual stimulation is still at its early stage and to date, few research is available that has been conducted on the influence of this leadership within a classroom setting (Evans 2009, p.94).

### **Benefits of a Transformational Classroom Leadership**

Burns (2003, p.22) illustrates the characteristics of an effective transformational leadership within a class context. In this case, he portrays that idealized influence and charisma are essential and are found in cases in which leaders show a sense of vision and mission. They show trust and commitment and display their most important values. Such a leadership concept is applicable in a class environment as students need to feel mutual respect for them to express their ideologies. Teachers show support and provide a platform for discussion and evaluation of alternatives (Hooper & Bernhardt 2016, p.60). Zepeda (2013, p.17) applies a Hong Kong study approach that explores the relationship between transformational leadership in a university classroom and the overall student perception towards the quality of the class instructor. Within a higher education setting, the results of his work indicate that the fourth wave of teacher leadership should include, and not limited to, transformational classroom leadership as a defining quality of a good teacher leader (DeFlaminis, Abdul-Jabbar, & Yoak 2016, p.2).

The teacher-leadership approach has been developing over time and is appreciated within schools, and higher

education institutions (Burgess & Newton 2014, p.67). Bass and Riggio (2006) argue that this development has occurred within three stages or waves where the first stage is confined within a formal organizational hierarchy. They place the concept close to the key function of teachers, which is instructing and teaching. In this stage, the departmental head was viewed as the archetypical teacher-leader. In this case, it was presented as a control model where teacher leaders were seen to manage the rest of the teachers who were then viewed as mere implementers of the leader's decisions (Harris & Muijs 2004, p.5). The second stage places more emphasis on the teaching function instructional dimension and still vested the type of leadership within formally developed organizational positions. These positions included team leaders and curriculum developers (Evans 2009, p.69). Despite the concept being moved out of the approach taken towards conventional organizational hierarchy, the second stage differentiated out leadership from teaching functions. According to Gilbert (2012, p.21), the second stage emphasizes control with instructional designers and curriculum developers to create tools for classroom teachers to apply.

However, this has been considered by many scholars as controlling teachers. In another approach, Shelton (2012, p.23) states that teachers, as leaders, are open to trying new methods and are initiators of learning with a key goal of improving students' experiences. They are modelers of learning and understand the needs of each student, and what can be done to enhance their skills and performance. Lang (2011, p.8) identified three important elements of the role that is termed as "lead teachers." These roles are illustrated as a review of the school practice, coaching and mentoring other teachers, school-level decision making, professional

development, and guiding and counseling. Additionally, in the same concept, Harris (2009, p.15) illustrates skills that are meant to characterize teachers as leaders. These are managing work, managing resources, building rapport and trust, developing the process, building confidence and skills in others, and organizational diagnosis. The third step of teacher leadership is articulated by Harris (2013, p.15) as the exercise of leadership by teachers within institutions without any designation or position with a key focus on improving education.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions:**

It is clear that the research done focuses on addressing the issues faced by higher education institutions. Most of the research shows that teacher leadership and distribution leadership has not been fully implemented within higher institutions, but there is gradual progress. However, most of the progress has been limited due to lack of mutual understanding and respect between teachers and faculty heads. In another case, most existing systems in higher education environments do not present teachers with a platform to exercise their leadership skills. This can be attributed to lack of support systems that can help teacher realize their full potentials in class other than teaching. An almost successful case of achieving an effective transformational leadership is witnessed within the United States teaching curriculum due to the involvement of teachers in various programs such as parent-teacher meetings and departmental meetings.

The issues and evidence presented is a clear indication that transformational and distrusted leadership is a possibility within education institutions when the right procedures are followed to enact it. There is an assumption that teachers can show their transformational leadership qualities within a classroom organization. Therefore, this is

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a good explanation leading to the conclusion that teachers have an excellent way of leading people as they understand better how to communicate and give instructions. However, further research is required to understand the leadership concepts that are applied within higher education. There is a big gap in research as available studies concentrate on school-based projects and not higher education.



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