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Transformational Leadership: Exploring Secondary School Leaders' Perceptions on Best Practices

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Abstract

This research delves into the dynamic realm of transformational leadership within the context of secondary education, primarily focusing on the perceptions and practices of secondary school leaders, particularly principals. Transformational leadership, characterized by its ability to inspire, motivate, and foster growth, is recognized as a pivotal force for achieving profound change within educational institutions. While this study employs qualitative research methods, it utilized a qualitative case study design, with 16 carefully selected participants equally distributed by gender, age, and experience, contributing insights through in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore how secondary school leaders perceive and enact transformational leadership. The study places transformational leadership within a framework encompassing instructional and moral leadership styles, linking them to expected impacts on school leadership. The research employs a general inductive approach for data analysis. The findings of this study bridge the gap between leadership theory and practice, offering valuable insights that may inform measures to enhance leadership practices among school principals and thereby elevate the quality of secondary education and student development.

Furthermore, the findings reveal several key themes, including the provision of personalized motivational support, the encouragement of creativity and critical thinking, the role of school principals as ethical role models, and the transformative impact of this leadership style on day-to-day school operations. The research emphasizes the significance of fostering a positive school culture, increasing teacher job satisfaction, enhancing student engagement, and improving the efficiency of school operations through transformational leadership. Ultimately, the study underscores the essential role of leadership in shaping the educational experience and offers valuable insights for improving leadership practices in secondary education, paving the way for a brighter and more promising future for the next generation.

Introduction

At the school level, leadership is necessary to fulfill multifaceted roles, and a leader must possess these aptitudes and competencies to meet the objectives (Lopez & Ensari, 2014). In the ever-evolving landscape of education, leadership is an indispensable force capable of reshaping the destiny of institutions and, more significantly, the lives of those they serve. Within the complex ecosystem of secondary schools, leaders wield a profound influence in navigating administrative challenges and igniting the transformative potential of educators and students alike. Transformational leadership, marked by its ability to inspire, motivate, and foster growth, has emerged as a cornerstone for achieving profound change within educational institutions (Shava & Heystek, 2021). The leadership style has also been found to influence a teacher's motivational level and job satisfaction, creating a learning environment in the school, managing human resources, and creating a change process (Waheed, Hussin, & Daud, 2018).

This research embarks on a compelling exploration into the realm of transformational leadership within the context of secondary schools, with a primary focus on understanding the perceptions and practices of school leaders. The central premise is that leadership transcends mere administrative roles and responsibilities to become an influential catalyst for educational excellence (Sheppard et al., 2021). As such, it becomes imperative to delve deeper into the perceptions held by secondary school leaders, for their beliefs, attitudes, and actions are not just indicative of their philosophy, but they also shape the experiences of students and educators under their guidance. Against this backdrop, our research endeavors to uncover the nuances of transformational leadership in secondary education. The core objectives include gaining insights into how secondary school leaders perceive transformational leadership and identifying the best practices they consider essential for fostering a culture of growth, empowerment, and positive change within their institutions.

This investigation seeks to close the knowledge gap between theory and practice by providing insightful information for decision-makers, teachers, and educational policymakers. The ultimate

goal is to improve secondary education quality and student development by examining the perceptions and practices of leaders who guide the process. In doing so, this study seeks to pave the path for educational institutions to harness the full potential of transformational leadership, thereby ensuring a brighter and more promising future for the next generation.

Statement of the Problem

This study's primary goal is to explore secondary school leaders' perceptions and experiences, specifically secondary school principals, within the Toledo City Division concerning transformational leadership style during the 2020-2021 school year. The overarching aim of this research is to gather valuable insights that can serve as a foundation for proposing measures to enhance the leadership practices of these school principals.

The study addresses the following specific research questions:

1. How do school principals provide personalized support and attention to staff and students to excel and reach their goals?

2. How do principals encourage creativity, innovation, and critical thinking among staff and students?

3. How do principals serve as exemplary role models, embodying the values they expect from others?

4. What is the impact of transformational leadership practices on the day-to-day operations and leadership approaches of school principals?

The study is anticipated to use qualitative research techniques, like questionnaires or interviews, to collect information from the school principals. The findings and recommendations from the study will likely inform proposed enhancement measures to develop further transformational leadership in Toledo City Division's secondary schools.

Conceptual Framework

According to the above research, motivational support and attention, fostering creativity, innovation, and critical thinking, role modelling and transformational leadership philosophies are more applicable in educational contexts. Personalized motivational support and attention involve school principals' dedication to nurturing a positive and inspiring atmosphere within the school (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). This leadership aspect emphasizes one-on-one interactions, mentorship, adaptive teaching strategies, and the active involvement of parents and the community. The goal is to empower staff and students individually, enhancing their morale, engagement, and overall success while creating a supportive, inclusive environment. Fostering creativity, innovation, and critical thinking focuses on creating an environment that encourages educators to experiment

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with various teaching methods and engage students more effectively (Blase, J., & Blase, 2003).

Principals lead by example, consistently exemplifying ethical and moral values such as integrity, respect, and professionalism. This ethical leadership sets the stage for a respectful, inclusive, and caring school environment, building trust and credibility and aiding in addressing challenges and conflicts effectively. Principals' role modeling extends beyond symbolism, influencing staff and students to follow suit, thereby shaping the character and values of the school (Deal & Peterson, 2016). This approach also considers the context, recognizing subjectivities and adapting to the requirements of the context (Yemini et al., 2015). The goal of transformational leadership is to fundamentally alter the current situation at a school (Watson & Rivera-McCutchen, 2016). Transformational leadership motivates and inspires followers (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders inspire a positive school culture, empower educators, and set high expectations, resulting in enhanced teacher morale and improved student performance.

This study delineates four distinct leadership styles prevalent in education. Based on Bass's 1985 model, transformational leadership aims to motivate and inspire followers to enhance their performance levels through charisma, motivation, intellectual stimulation, and personalized consideration. This framework explores the anticipated impacts of these leadership styles on school leadership: transformational leadership is expected to facilitate radical change by inspiring followers to excel; instructional leadership is poised to enhance the quality of teaching and learning processes; and moral leadership is seen as promoting ethical values and social justice within school leadership. This framework further offers a structured approach to understanding and assessing the roles and influences of various leadership styles in the educational setting.

Research Methodology

The research in question is fundamentally qualitative, with its core objective being the exploration of distinctive leadership styles demonstrated by school heads within secondary schools across Toledo City Division. To achieve this, the research method of choice is a case study, as outlined by Yin (2009). Each head of a secondary school is selected as a unique case for a comprehensive analysis.

The selection of participants for the study is a meticulous process. The study involves 16 participants, with an equal number of men and women. They were carefully chosen based on specific criteria, including their age bracket (between 35 and 50), educational and career background, and proven track record of effective leadership within the division. Furthermore, all participants had accumulated at least five years of experience in their roles as school heads.

To ensure the relevance and depth of the data collected, purposive sampling was employed. This method involves deliberately selecting participants with characteristics most pertinent to the research topic.

Data collection relied primarily on semi-structured interviews. Each interview session spanned approximately 30 to 40 minutes and took place in the professional environments of the school heads. Before formal data collection, a preliminary study was conducted to fine-tune the interview protocol and craft more precise and insightful questions.

The utmost care was taken to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents, thereby respecting their privacy and protecting their identities.

Thomas's general inductive approach, as outlined in Thomas (2006), was employed for the critical task of data analysis. This approach involved systematically identifying codes within the interview data and organizing them into themes based on shared characteristics. This method allowed for a structured and insightful interpretation of the data.

In essence, this qualitative research study utilized a case study design with purposive sampling to delve into the multifaceted realm of leadership styles among school heads in secondary education. Data was meticulously gathered through semi-structured interviews and thoughtfully analyzed, following a general inductive approach—the research aimed to offer a deeper understanding of leadership styles as embodied by the selected school heads.

Findings

The findings of this study illuminate four pivotal themes in educational leadership. These themes encompass the importance of personalized motivational support and attention, the cultivation of creativity, innovation, and critical thinking, the role modeling of ethical values by school principals, and the transformative impact of leadership on school culture and student engagement.

Personalized Motivational support and attention leadership

The support strategies for leadership of the school leaders were one of the main themes that came out of the data analysis. School principals offer personalized support and attention to staff and students through various strategies. They initiate one-on-one meetings with individuals to foster direct communication, address concerns, and establish trust. Principals provide guidance and mentorship tailored to unique needs and aspirations, aiding personal and professional growth. Recognizing and leveraging strengths is integral, allowing them to allocate responsibilities and resources effectively. They encourage an inclusive and supportive environment, acknowledging the diverse needs of their community. Adaptive teaching strategies and tailored professional development plans are also implemented to accommodate different learning styles and career goals. In times of crisis or personal difficulties, they provide immediate support and connect individuals with relevant resources. Regular feedback and evaluation ensure ongoing improvement. By engaging parents and the community, principals extend their network of support.

Lastly, they allocate resources thoughtfully to address specific needs. In this way, school principals

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play a pivotal role in fostering a positive and productive educational environment through personalized care and attention to staff and students. The head of one school considered it the most important thing to be properly managed to improve an organization in schools. She stated:

A school head's role extends beyond management; it includes providing personalized motivational support to both staff and students. This nurturing aspect of leadership fosters a positive and inspiring atmosphere within the school. School leaders empower their teams and students to thrive by offering individualized encouragement. This personal touch enhances morale, engagement, and overall success, creating a more vibrant and fulfilling educational experience. A caring and motivational school head helps the entire school community reach its full potential. The essence of transformational leadership lies in crafting a vision that genuinely excites and rallies potential talents. This vision isn't just a lofty goal; it's a beacon that aligns with the school's core objectives, instilling a profound sense of purpose and direction.

As a leader, I believe it's pivotal to translate this vision into a tangible roadmap through strategic planning. This roadmap not only charts our course but equips us to address challenges creatively, contributing to the growth and enrichment of our school community.

The interview excerpt highlights the significant emphasis placed on staff and students' feedback and input by the school heads. This finding was further corroborated by another leader of the institution, who expressed a similar sentiment:

Absolutely, I believe that involving our staff and students in decision-making processes is vital to creating an inclusive and productive learning environment. I actively encourage our staff and faculty members and students to share their thoughts, concerns, and innovative ideas. We have regular meetings, surveys, and suggestion boxes to ensure they have a platform to voice their opinions. I find that this not only enhances morale but also leads to continuous improvement in our school's programs and policies.

Indeed, these leaders' dedication to serving society by providing high-quality education to the less privileged is genuinely commendable. Their role as supportive and motivational leaders exemplifies deep-seated care for their students and a commitment to their well-being and academic growth.

These leaders are mentors and friends to their students, always within reach to help resolve any challenges and make the learning journey more smooth and enjoyable. Their genuine empathy extends to their students and their staff, fostering a culture of understanding, collaboration, and support.

In essence, these qualities in leadership create an environment where students flourish, and the entire educational community thrives. The kindness and closeness demonstrated by these leaders contribute to a nurturing and compassionate atmosphere that not only elevates academic outcomes

but also enriches the lives of everyone involved. Their impact extends far beyond the institution's walls, positively influencing society.

Fostering creativity, innovation, and critical thinking leadership

Creativity, innovation, and critical thinking in educational leadership, particularly within schools, are essential for student development and success. School principals are crucial in creating an environment that encourages these qualities. Promoting flexible teaching strategies allows teachers to experiment with various approaches and modify the curriculum to meet individual student needs. Empowering educators to be creative in their teaching approach helps students engage with the material more personalized and effectively.

Furthermore, school leaders can encourage innovation by supporting initiatives like project-based learning. This approach involves students in hands-on, collaborative projects that require problem-solving and critical thinking. Principals can allocate resources and guide teachers in designing and implementing these projects, ensuring innovation remains at the forefront of the educational experience.

Professional development is another crucial aspect of fostering creativity and innovation. Principals should invest in ongoing training and support for teachers, helping them stay up-to-date with new teaching methods, technology integration, and pedagogical innovations. Educators can create a more dynamic and innovative classroom environment with these skills. As instructional leaders, the interviews revealed that school heads demonstrated various practices that could enhance their creativity, innovation, and critical thinking in educational leadership. As head stated:

As a principal, I found that the role of being an instructional leader allowed me to embrace a multifaceted approach to fostering creativity, innovation, and critical thinking in educational leadership. I achieved this by promoting open-mindedness and collaboration among my staff, encouraging them to think beyond traditional boundaries and explore novel teaching methods. My emphasis on professional development and continuous learning led to an environment where educators were inspired to stay up-to-date with the latest pedagogical trends, sparking innovation. Additionally, I actively sought feedback from students, parents, and teachers, and consistently adapted our strategies based on these insights. This dynamic engagement made me a creative, innovative, and critical thinker in the realm of educational leadership, a path I proudly continued to tread.

Furthermore, school principals can integrate problem-solving activities into the curriculum to promote critical thinking. This may involve dedicated essential classes of thinking, extracurricular clubs, or the incorporation of problem-solving exercises in various subjects. Open discussions and debates should also be encouraged, allowing students to develop their analytical and critical thinking

skills as they learn to analyze information, form arguments, and communicate their ideas effectively.

In addition to these strategies, fostering a sense of community involvement and collaboration is vital. Principals can engage the community in school activities encouraging creativity and innovation, such as partnerships with local businesses, universities, or organizations providing students with real-world experiences and mentorship opportunities.

Lastly, continuously assessing these initiatives is essential to ensure they achieve the desired outcomes. School principals can create a dynamic and engaging educational environment that fosters creativity, innovation, and critical thinking in students and educators by adapting and refining these strategies based on feedback and results. This, in turn, prepares students for success in a rapidly changing world, equipping them with the skills and mind-set necessary to thrive in the 21st century.

Principal role modelling leadership

Principals hold a crucial role in shaping the culture and values of a school, and serving as role models is a fundamental aspect of their leadership. By consistently exemplifying the ethical and moral values they expect from the school community, they lead by example in areas such as integrity, respect, and professionalism. Principals who embody these values can have a profound positive influence on the school culture and the behavior of both staff and students. Their leadership, based on ethical and moral principles, not only builds trust and credibility but also helps in addressing challenges and conflicts within the school community. Effective role modeling by principals is a cornerstone of fostering a respectful, inclusive, and caring school environment and is essential for effective educational leadership.

Principals serve as the linchpin in shaping the culture and values of a school, and their role as role models within the educational institution cannot be overstated. They play a pivotal role in influencing the behavior and mind-set of the entire school community, including staff and students. One school head expressed herself with joy as she said:

As a school principal committed to role modeling leadership in the education setting, every day is an opportunity to inspire and empower the next generation. I strive to be a beacon of integrity, compassion, and dedication, leading not just with words but through actions. From welcoming students with a warm smile at the school gates to fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect in the classrooms, I believe in setting an example that transcends the curriculum. It's in those moments when a struggling student's face lights up with understanding, or a teacher finds the support and encouragement needed to excel, that I find my greatest fulfillment. Education isn't just about textbooks and exams; it's about nurturing young minds and hearts, and I am grateful for the privilege of guiding this transformative journey.

In this capacity, they are responsible for consistently demonstrating ethical and moral values, setting the stage for integrity, respect, and professionalism.

One of the fundamental aspects of their leadership is leading by example. Principals are expected to lead with unwavering commitment to honesty, fairness, empathy, and the welfare of all students and staff. By embodying these values, they message to everyone within the school community about their significance.

The influence of principals who exemplify ethical and moral values ripples throughout the school culture. Their leadership team's adherence to these values encourages a ripple effect, inspiring staff and students to follow suit. This collective effort can yield a more inclusive, respectful, and compassionate school environment that thrives on shared principles.

In this capacity, principals' behavior and values extend beyond mere symbolism. Staff members often look to their leaders for guidance and inspiration, and students frequently model their behavior after the adults they encounter daily. Principals who consistently exhibit ethical and moral values inspire those around them to do the same.

Beyond shaping culture and behavior, their role modeling is pivotal in building trust and credibility within the school community. Trust is the cornerstone of effective leadership, and when principals are seen as ethical and moral leaders, it becomes easier to garner the trust and respect of those they lead.

Moreover, ethical and moral role modeling equips principals with a valuable tool when addressing challenges and conflicts. Their consistent demonstration of these values can guide resolving disputes and promoting understanding, contributing to a more harmonious and cooperative school environment.

In essence, the role of principals as role models extends far beyond their administrative duties. Their consistent demonstration of ethical and moral values, along with other qualities like effective communication, inclusivity, adaptability, and resilience, plays a vital role in shaping the character and values of the school. Their leadership, grounded in these principles, is instrumental in creating a thriving and harmonious educational environment.

Transformational leadership

When embraced by a school principal, transformational leadership in education can profoundly impact the educational institution. Through transformational leadership, a more positive and motivated school culture is cultivated, inspiring educators and students to strive for their fullest potential. This approach often leads to increased teacher job satisfaction, as teachers feel empowered and valued in their roles, and it fosters heightened student engagement by setting high expectations and promoting a dynamic learning environment.

Moreover, the school's day-to-day operations tend to become more efficient and effective, thanks to innovative and creative problem-solving encouraged by transformational leaders, ultimately resulting in improved educational outcomes and overall student success. Though demanding, it's a comprehensive approach that offers a promising path toward better educational experiences and achievements.

One of the key outcomes of transformational leadership is the creation of a positive school culture. Transformational leaders inspire teachers and staff to work together towards common goals, articulating a compelling vision for the future. This encourages a sense of cohesion and inclusivity, where all school community members feel valued and motivated, fostering a strong sense of belonging and unity. A school head expressed happiness about the significance of unity and cooperation in school as he shared:

I am incredibly fortunate to serve as a school principal under the guidance of a remarkable leader who embodies the essence of transformational leadership in education. From the moment I joined the institution, their unwavering dedication to innovation and growth has been nothing short of inspiring. With a visionary approach, they have fostered an environment where every member of the school community is encouraged to dream big, to think outside the box, and to embrace change as an opportunity for progress. Through their visionary leadership, our school has seen profound transformations; academic achievement has soared, teacher morale has never been higher, and the culture of collaboration and student-centered learning has become our very foundation. This leader's profound impact on our educational institution extends beyond tangible results; it has ignited a sense of purpose and passion in all of us, reminding us that, in education, we have the power to shape not just our students' futures but the future of our society itself.

Furthermore, transformational leadership increases teacher job satisfaction, a crucial element for a productive educational environment. These leaders invest in educators' personal and professional development, empowering them to take ownership of their work and encouraging creativity and innovation. This recognition and support translate into more excellent teacher morale, leading to more content and motivated teaching staff.

Student engagement is also a hallmark of transformational leadership in education. These leaders place a strong emphasis on engaging and motivating students to succeed. Setting high expectations and promoting a dynamic learning environment inspires students to participate in their education actively. This focus on student engagement often results in improved academic performance and a more positive and fulfilling educational experience for the students.

Efficiency and effectiveness in day-to-day operations are another significant advantage of transformational leadership. These leaders are skilled at promoting innovation and problem-solving, leading to the development of more efficient teaching methods and administrative processes. This

efficiency enhances the schools overall functioning, making operations more streamlined and productive.

Ultimately, the goal of transformational leadership in education is to improve educational outcomes. By fostering a positive culture, boosting teacher morale, engaging students, and enhancing operational efficiency, transformational leaders contribute to improved academic results and overall student success. This approach enriches the educational experience for both students and educators and positively impacts academic achievement and school performance.

Discussions

There is this imperative need to reinforce transformational leadership in the educational landscape. It highlights how transformational leaders, in this case, secondary school principals, go beyond traditional administrative roles. They become catalysts for positive change, inspiring educators and students to excel. This emphasis on transformational leadership is crucial in an ever-evolving educational environment, where innovation, motivation, and fostering a culture of growth are paramount. The findings of this study reinforce the notion that effective leadership is essential for not only the success of educational institutions but also for the holistic development of the individuals they serve.

One of the significant findings of this study is the emphasis placed on providing personalized support and attention. School principals recognize staff and students' unique needs and aspirations and employ various strategies to address these individual requirements. This approach creates a nurturing and inclusive environment where each school community member feels valued and supported. It goes beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and acknowledges the diverse needs of the school's community. This personalized care and attention boosts morale and engagement and contributes to a more vibrant and fulfilling educational experience. It underscores the idea that transformational leadership is deeply rooted in understanding and catering to the specific needs of those being led.

School leaders create a more inclusive and productive learning environment by actively encouraging feedback, innovative ideas, and open communication. This approach enhances morale and leads to continuous improvement in the school's programs and policies. It emphasizes that transformational leaders empower their community by giving them a voice in the decisions that affect them directly, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility.

While the findings primarily revolve around transformational and instructional leadership, including moral leadership as a theoretical construct is a valuable contribution. It underscores the importance of ethics and social responsibility in educational leadership and how they can influence the school environment. This aspect adds depth to the discussion by highlighting the multifaceted nature of leadership in education.

School leaders, educators, and policymakers can draw on the insights provided in this study to improve leadership practices, foster a culture of growth, and enhance the overall quality of secondary education. By recognizing the significance of personalized support, inclusive decision-making, and the role of a compelling vision, educational institutions can work toward a more promising future for the next generation. This study serves as a valuable resource for those seeking to bridge the gap between leadership theory and its application in the context of secondary schools, ultimately contributing to the ongoing conversation on the vital role of leadership in education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study delves into the realm of transformational leadership in secondary schools, shedding light on the perceptions and practices of school leaders, particularly secondary school principals in Toledo City Division. The findings unveil a deeply committed cadre of educational leaders prioritizing personalized motivational support and attention, creating an environment where staff and students can thrive. As this was exploratory qualitative research, which is often less prone to generalization, further leadership-related research on a broader level may be conducted to explore the issues in greater detail. Most of the school heads employed a transformational leadership style to bring changes in the school set-ups. Committing as a moral and ethical leader positively influences school performance. Leaders in high-performing schools focus on the student's social, honesty, and emotional well-being and remain close to the students. These leaders embody the essence of transformational leadership by crafting and translating a compelling vision, fostering creativity, and actively involving the school community in decision-making processes. Their dedication to their students' academic growth and well-being, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, is commendable. This research underscores leadership's pivotal role in shaping the educational experience, going beyond mere administrative responsibilities to inspire growth, empowerment, and positive change. The researcher also recommends conducting longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of transformational leadership, comparing its effectiveness with other leadership styles, developing leadership training programs, and exploring the influence of cultural and contextual factors. Further research should also investigate the impact on student outcomes, integrate leadership principles into policy, gather teacher and student perspectives, employ quantitative analysis, and extend the research cross-nationally. These recommendations aim to build upon the study's insights, contributing to the enhancement of leadership practices and the quality of secondary education. Ultimately, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on transformational leadership, offering insights that can inform and enhance leadership practices, thus paving the way for a brighter and more promising future for the next generation in secondary education.

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