Leadership theory and educational outcomes: The case of distributed and transformational leadership

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Abstract
The effect of school leadership on educational outcomes has been widely debated in recent decades. Only a small fraction of available studies on school leadership deal with its effects on specific educational outcomes. The paper aims to provide an overview of research on the effects of two contemporary leadership theories (distributed leadership and transformational leadership) on educational outcomes. The theoretical basis for each theory is discussed, with reference to different approaches to the conceptualisation of distributed and transformational perspectives in the literature. Moreover, the paper attempts to analyse the main limitations of the two theories and to assess their contribution to the investigation of the effects of leadership on educational outcomes. The overview of evidence on the effects of distributed and transformational leadership is used as the basis for suggestions and recommendations in relation to future research.

Keywords: Distributed leadership, transformational leadership, educational outcomes

Introduction
In recent decades, the literature on educational administration has focused on the study of leadership concepts, models, and practices. Despite the abundance of studies on educational leadership, very few have attempted to measure the effect of school leadership on educational outcomes. Robinson (2008) draws attention to the fact that less than 30 of the published studies of educational leadership, have investigated the link between leadership and student outcomes. The limited research on the topic does not allow for the informed promotion and/or adoption of leadership models and practices in education in that policy makers lack the evidence that can serve as the basis for the support of specific approaches to leadership.

The paper aims to provide an overview of research on the effects of two contemporary leadership theories (distributed leadership and transformational leadership) on educational outcomes. It will thus provide a review of international literature on the two theories in relation to their effects on key educational outcomes. It will mainly focus on student outcome variables such as student performance even though it will also address the link between leadership practices and teacher-related outcomes (e.g. teachers’ organisational commitment). Moreover, an attempt is made to critically evaluate the contribution of the two theories to educational improvement through an examination of their limitations and weaknesses. In this context, the paper aims to provide a synthesis of available research, which will serve as the basis for conclusions regarding the contribution of the two theories to the investigation of the effects of leadership on educational outcomes.

The paper begins with an overview of distributed and transformational leadership as they appear in the educational administration literature. It then proceeds to investigate their effects on key outcomes based on a review of relevant research. Finally, it examines the limitations of the two theories and discusses implications for future research.
Distributed and Transformational Leadership: The Theory

Distributed Leadership

The term “distributed leadership” is believed to have been used for the first time by Gibb (1954), an Australian psychologist, who drew attention to the dynamics of influence processes as they impact on the work of different groups. Gibb suggests that leadership should not be viewed as the monopoly of the individual but rather as shared functions among individuals. The belief that leadership is best considered a group quality has gradually gained widespread acceptance in the field of education. Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons and Hopkins (2007) describe distributed leadership as “the leadership idea of the moment”, while Gronn (2000) refers to this concept as “the new kid on the block”. A review of the educational administration literature suggests that the concept of distributed leadership has been embraced with enthusiasm by educational researchers and scholars. Two popular interpretations of distributed leadership theory are found in the work of Peter Gronn and James Spillane.

Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004) refer to leadership as distributed practice. Spillane (2006) draws on work in cognitive psychology emphasising distributed cognition and the role of the social context as an influence on human learning and behaviour. In organisations, both formal and informal groups are believed to constantly interact, resulting in shared patterns of communication, learning and action. In this context, distributed leadership emerges as a shared practice by individuals seeking to address organisational issues and problems. At the school, teachers may be considered to engage in distributed leadership practice when, for instance, they collaborate in an attempt to take action regarding specific problems.

A distributed perspective can be viewed as a conceptual framework for investigating school leadership and management. It involves two aspects: the leader-plus aspect (who) and the practice aspect (how). The leader-plus aspect acknowledges that the work of leading schools involves multiple individuals and is not restricted to those at the top of the organisational hierarchy or those assigned formal leadership duties. In this framework, leadership practice is the outcome of the interaction of school leaders, followers, and their situations (Spillane, Hunt, & Healy, 2008). Consequently, the distributed view of leadership is responsible from a shift of focus in that the emphasis is no longer on school principals and other formal and informal leaders but on a web of stakeholders and their situations (Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

Gronn (2002a) suggests that the distributed perspective introduces a dynamic understanding of leadership according to which leadership is no longer individually conceived. He argues against traditional approaches of leadership based on the assumption of the superiority of the leader and the dependence of followers on leaders. A new perspective of leadership is proposed, grounded in a theory of action. According to Gronn (2000, p. 325), a distributed view of organisational activities and tasks is linked to a new form of the division of labour in organisations, in which “the authorship and the scope of the activities to be performed have to be redefined to encompass pluralities of agents whose actions dovetail or mesh to express new patterns of interdependent relations.”

Gronn (2002b) distinguishes between two forms of distributed leadership, namely, “additive” and “holistic”. Additive forms of distribution refer an uncoordinated leadership pattern, in which many different people may engage in leadership practices without taking into account the leadership activities of others in the organisation. Holistic leadership refers to consciously existing and managed collaborative patterns involving some or all leadership sources in the organisation.
This form of distributed leadership assumes that the sum of the work performed by leaders adds up to more than the parts and that there are high levels of interdependence among those engaged in leadership.

In an attempt to arrive at a taxonomy of distributed leadership, Gronn (2003) focuses on working relations and practices. The taxonomy is based primarily on a distinction between co-performed work and collectively performed work and on the type of concertive action (intuitive working relations versus institutionalised practices). More recently, Gronn (2008) has suggested that leadership in some situations is "hybrid" rather than truly distributed. He uses the term hybrid to refer to the mix of solo, dyadic, triadic and team leadership groupings that occur in some schools and acknowledges that there may be “highly influential individuals working in parallel with collectivities” (Gronn, 2008, p. 152).

Both Spillane’s and Gronn’s accounts of distributed leadership are descriptive in that they attempt to provide a coherent conceptual base for this idea of leadership. However, the unit of analysis is not the same (Timperley, 2005): Spillane et al. (2004, p. 9) refer to “actors in situations working with artefacts”, while Gronn (2003, p. 24) considers his unit of analysis to refer to “the idea of a bounded set of elements comprising the elements which is the focus of research.” This is an indication of important differences in the approaches of different authors to distributed leadership. In general, “distributed leadership” has been assigned different meanings in the literature (Mayrowetz, 2008; Woods, Bennett, Harvey, & Wise, 2004), with the term being often used to refer to any type of collaborative and/or shared leadership activity (Harris et al., 2007). One difference in the descriptions or accounts of distributed leadership found in the literature concerns its relationship to transformational leadership. As noted by Timperley (2005, p. 397), one important issue concerns the question of “whether one is a sub-set of the other, and if so which is a sub-set of which.”

**Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership is characterised by an explicit focus on role of the leaders in the development of followers (Dansereau, Yammarino, & Markham, 1995). The distinction between transactional and transformational leadership is believed to have originated with Downton (1973) even though it became widely known through Burns’ (1978) work on political leaders.

According to Burns (1978), a distinction can be drawn between two forms of leadership:

1. **Transactional leadership** is based on an exchange relationship between leader and follower. The follower offers compliance to the leader (e.g. productivity, and commitment to the organisation) and receives tangible rewards in return (e.g. financial benefits). Thus, transactional leaders engage in exchanges with followers without any consideration for individual and/or organisational change and development.

2. **Transformational leadership** takes place when leaders interact with followers in ways that enhance their creativity and motivation in the organisation (Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders engage with followers, focusing on their intrinsic motivation and confidence. Unlike transactional leadership, transformational leadership does not seek to maintain the status quo but provides a stimulus for change and innovation instead (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformational leaders manage to motivate others to achieve more than originally planned or intended; they create a supportive organisational climate where individual needs and differences are acknowledged and
respected (Bass, 1998). The building of trust and respect motivates followers to work for the accomplishment of shared goals. Thus, transformational leaders motivate followers to focus on the common good, through commitment to the mission and vision of the organisation.

Burn’s work has provided the fundamental conceptual framework for the work of Bass (1985). Drawing on Burn’s framework, Bass (1985) developed a model of transformational leadership through the investigation of the behaviour of leaders in both public and private organisations. The data for his research mostly originated from military, business, and educational organisations. According to Bass and his colleagues, transactional and transformational forms of leadership are separate but interdependent (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Bass, 1985). In this respect, his conceptualisation differs from that of Burns (1978), who considered transactional and transformational leadership to be opposite extremes on a continuum, with a leader being one of the two (transactional or transformational). Thus, in the model proposed by Bass, transformational forms of leadership can enhance transactional forms through their effects on follower motivation and creativity.

Bass and his colleagues put forward five factors which constitute the main components of transformational leadership behaviour:
1. Attributed idealised influence refers to the degree to which followers consider leaders to be trustworthy and charismatic, with a clear and attainable mission and a vision.
2. Idealised influence as behaviour refers to the actual leader behaviour characterised by values and a sense of purpose. Through idealised influence, followers identify with leaders and try to follow their example.
3. Inspirational motivation is linked to the behaviour of the leader which inspires followers by providing them with meaning and challenge. To enhance the motivation of followers, leaders project hope and optimism for the future, thus enhancing commitment to a shared vision.
4. Intellectual stimulation takes place when leaders encourage followers to be creative and innovative in the organisation. Followers are expected to be critical in relation to existing assumptions and traditions. Both leaders and followers are open to a re-examination of their own beliefs and perspectives, placing a high value on improvement and change.
5. Individualised consideration refers to a situation where leaders focus on individual needs and relate to followers on a one-to-one basis. Followers are encouraged to achieve personal goals and pursue their own development.

Research on transformational leadership in educational settings has enriched and/or expanded the original conceptualisation of Burns (1978) and Bass (1985). Leithwood and his colleagues have investigated transformational leadership through work initiated in Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Based on the findings of both quantitative and qualitative research, they have put forward a model of transformational leadership encompassing the following three main categories of leadership practices: Setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organisation (see, for example, Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). These include nine dimensions of practice, which can be further subdivided into more specific practices linked to the context of the leader’s work (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999).

In addition to the research conducted by Leithwood and his colleagues in Canada, several attempts have been made to investigate the nature and effects of transformational leadership in other countries. The instrument used in many such studies is the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) developed by Bass and
Avolio (1997) to measure leadership style. The MLQ is based on three leadership constructs (transformational leadership, transactional leadership and laissez-faire leadership) (Barnett & McCormick, 2004). Since its introduction, the questionnaire has been considerably revised, partly to address criticisms of early versions.

The Evidence

Distributed Leadership

Research on distributed forms of leadership is still at its early stages (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Even though research suggests that distributed leadership is more likely to have a greater impact on student achievement/outcomes than traditional, top down forms of leadership (Gronn, 2000; Spillane et al., 2004), the available empirical evidence is not abundant. In this section, we discuss the findings of a small number of studies which have attempted to link distributed leadership to educational outcomes.

The effect of distributed leadership on student outcomes has not been adequately explored in the literature. In a discussion of the evidence regarding the relationship between distributed leadership and organisational outcomes, Harris et al. (2007) drew attention to two studies of the effects of leadership on student outcomes, the study by Leithwood and Jantzi (1999, 2000) in Canada and the study by Silins and Mulford (2002) in Tasmania. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999, 2000) examined the effect of principal and teacher leadership on student engagement with school, based on the analysis of survey data from a sample of 1762 teachers and 9941 students in a large Canadian district. They found that principal sources of leadership had larger effects on student engagement than teacher sources of leadership. The authors reported nonsignificant negative effects of collective leadership on students.

In a more recent study, Leithwood and Mascall (2008) investigated the effects of collective leadership on student achievement. Collective leadership was conceptualised and operationalised as “a form of distributed influence and control”. The teacher data consisted of 2570 survey responses from teachers, while student achievement data in language and mathematics were obtained through school websites. Collective leadership was found to explain significant variation in student achievement across schools, with the effect of collective leadership most strongly linked to achievement through teacher motivation. Schools with students in the highest 20% achievement category reported most sources of collective influence to be considerably more influential. Leithwood and Mascall (2008) pointed to differences in the findings between this and earlier studies and attributed these differences to the choice of mediating variables in the investigation of leadership effects on student outcomes.

Another important study was conducted in Australia by Silins and Mulford (2002). They examined leadership effects on student learning outcomes based on survey data collected from over 2500 teachers and 35000 15-year old Australian high school students. They reported that student outcomes were more likely to improve when leadership sources were distributed throughout the members of the school community and when teachers felt empowered in relation to issues they considered important. Their research provides additional evidence in support of an indirect effect of school leadership on outcomes, pointing to the complexity of the processes through which distributed forms of leadership have an impact on student learning outcomes. Based on their findings, Silins and Mulford put forward the concept of “deep democracy”, which includes, among others, respect for the worth of the individual and his/her cultural traditions and the importance attached to collective choices and actions in the organisation.
It is also important to acknowledge the contribution of "The Distributed Leadership Study", a collection of research projects undertaken in US schools to investigate distributed leadership practice. This four-year longitudinal study focused on 13 elementary schools in Chicago and drew attention to the importance of the school rather than the individual leader as the most appropriate unit for the development of leadership expertise (Spillane & Zoltners Sherer, 2004; Spillane et al., 2004). Spillane and Zoltners Sherer (2004) pointed to a link between distributed leadership practice in elementary schools and an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in certain subjects.

In smaller studies, Harris and Muijs (2004) reported positive relationships between the extent of teachers’ involvement in decision-making and student motivation and self-efficacy. Their research suggested that more distributed forms of leadership had a positive impact on student engagement. More recently, Harris (2008), based on case studies, provided data in support of the positive effects of distributed leadership. Specifically, the findings of these case studies point to a positive impact of distributed practices of leadership on organisational and individual learning.

In addition to attempts to investigate the link between distributed leadership and student outcomes, a small number of studies have focused on the link between distributed leadership and other educational outcomes. For instance, Mascall, Leithwood, Straus and Sacks (2008) examined the relationship between distributed leadership and teachers’ academic optimism. They collected data from 1640 elementary and secondary teachers in Ontario through an online survey. According to their findings, there was a significant association between planned approaches to the distribution of leadership and high levels of academic optimism. In another study, Hulpiar and Devos (2010) explored the link between distributed leadership and teachers’ organisational commitment through semi-structured interviews with teachers. They found that teachers were more committed to the school when school leaders were highly accessible and encouraged their participation in decision making.

The results presented above provide an indication of a positive link between distributed leadership and educational outcomes. However, systematic research into the topic remains limited; thus, more evidence is necessary in order to assess the effect of more distributed patterns of leadership on educational outcomes.

Transformational Leadership
Research on the effects of transformational leadership on educational outcomes is also limited even though some attempts have been made to investigate whether transformational leadership has an impact on school culture, and certain teacher and student outcomes. In addition, contemporary empirical research examines whether leadership affects these factors directly, or whether its effects are mediated by other organisational variables.

Koh, Steers and Terborg (1995) investigated the effects of transformational leadership on teacher attitudes and student performance in Singapore. Data were collected from school teachers and principals using instruments such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. When compared to transactional leadership, transformational leadership was found to be associated with additional positive effects in predicting organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour and teacher satisfaction. The effects of transformational leadership on student academic achievement were indirect.
In Canada, Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) found transformational leadership to have strong positive effects on organisational conditions (school and classroom conditions). School conditions included variables such as school planning and organisational culture, while classroom conditions referred to instructional services, and policies and procedures. The effects of transformational leadership on student engagement in school were significant but weak on the affective and behavioural dimensions of student engagement.

Geijsel, Sleegers, Leithwood and Jantzi (2003) used data from Canada and the Netherlands to investigate the effects of transformational leadership on teacher commitment and effort towards school reform. Both the Dutch and the Canadian study found the dimensions of transformational leadership to have modest effects on teacher commitment to reform. Of all dimensions, vision building and intellectual stimulation were reported to have a significant effect on teacher commitment and extra effort, unlike individualised consideration which was found to have the weakest influence.

In a US study of the relation of transformational leadership to school staff job satisfaction, turnover and school performance, Griffith (2004) reported no direct association between principal transformational leadership and school staff turnover or student achievement progress. Two indirect effects (through job satisfaction) were identified, one being negative in relation to staff turnover and the other positive in relation to student achievement progress. Moreover, in schools with higher levels of transformational leadership practices, the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students was found to be smaller.

Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) used data from a national literacy and numeracy programme in England to examine the effects of a transformational leadership model on teacher variables, classroom practices and student achievement. The teacher variables included in the investigation were motivation, capacities (ability required for performance) and work settings (teachers’ collective practices in relation to large-scale reform, and the collective efficacy of the staff). Using path analytic techniques, the authors found leadership to have significant effects on teachers’ classroom practices. Specifically, leadership, along with the three teacher variables, explained about 25% to 35% in teachers’ classroom practices. However, there were no significant effects of leadership on student achievement.

The available research on the effects of transformational leadership suggests that it is more likely to have a direct impact on organisational processes associated with employee practices, motivation and satisfaction, which in turn are linked to the quality of the service offered and the performance of the organisation. In most studies, positive indirect effects on student outcomes have been identified, with at least one study reporting a significant negative association between transformational leadership behaviour and student outcomes: In Australia, Barnett, McCormick and Conners (2001) reported that while transformational leadership was positively linked to teacher outcomes such as satisfaction and extra effort, it was negatively associated with student learning culture.

The findings on the effects of transformational leadership appear to support earlier research on the effects of leadership on outcomes, which finds them to be indirect through actions that school leaders take to influence the situation in the school and the classrooms (see, for example, Hallinger, 2003). Thus, the nature of the relationship between leadership and educational outcomes makes it necessary to identify those intervening variables that are likely to have a direct impact on students.
According to Leithwood and Jantzi (1999, p. 114), this constitutes “a significant challenge for leadership research.”

**Limitations and Weaknesses**

*Distributed Leadership*

Despite its widespread use in studies of educational leadership, the concept of distributed leadership remains unclear, with different definitions found in the literature. Mayrowetz (2008) identifies the following four common usages of the term “distributed leadership” and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each. The first usage is linked to the theoretical approach advocated by Gronn and Spillane, who use the term to examine the activity of leadership, drawing on other areas of social science. In the second usage, distributed leadership is linked to the promotion of democratic ideals while in the third, it is presented as a way to improve organisational efficiency and effectiveness since the distribution of leadership practice allows for the utilisation of multiple sources of knowledge and expertise. The fourth usage presents distributed leadership as the means to advance human capacity building in the organisation, through its emphasis on the development of individual skills and abilities associated with participation in leadership activity. Mayrowetz (2008, p. 432) points to the need for “a shared, theoretically informed definition of distributed leadership that is well connected to the problems of practice that this field engages, specifically school improvement and leadership development.” Even though some definitions can serve this purpose better than others (e.g. the view of distributed leadership as human capacity building), the research evidence is not sufficient to promote the link between this form of leadership and school improvement.

The lack of a clear approach to the definition of distributed leadership has been highlighted by other authors. According to Harris et al. (2007, p. 338), the term is conveniently used to provide a description of “many types of shared or collaborative leadership practice.” They also note that distributed leadership has been used in the literature to refer to the opposite of hierarchical leadership and has been linked to “bossless” or “self-managed” groups. Robinson (2008) identifies two main alternative conceptions of distributed leadership: “distributed leadership as task distribution” and “distributed leadership as distributed influence processes.” Thus, there appears to be little agreement in the literature regarding the meaning of the term. In fact, it is debatable whether, as Timperley (2005, p. 396) claims, “one point on which different authors appear to agree is that distributed leadership is not the same as dividing task responsibilities among individuals who perform defined and separate organisational roles.”

The different approaches to the definition of distributed leadership have implications for research on the topic. Differences in the definition of the term can be linked to differences in its operationalisation and measurement. Thus, findings of different studies may not be comparable if authors use different variables to measure distributed leadership. Consequently, the findings from the few available studies of the effects of distributed leadership on educational outcomes may not provide us with a reliable indication of its role in promoting certain outcomes and/or behaviours at the school unit. In the case of transformational leadership, the early development of a research instrument (MLQ) has promoted research on the topic in different countries by providing a common basis for the collection and analysis of data. A comparable research tool is lacking in the case of distributed leadership even though attempts
have been made to develop an appropriate instrument (see, Hulpia, Devos, & Rosseel, 2009).

An additional concern relates to the extent to which certain assumptions linked to distributed leadership theory are valid. For instance, it has been widely assumed that distributed leadership is good leadership even though this is not necessarily the case. A lot depends on the quality of distributed leadership as well as on the method and purpose of its distribution (Harris et al., 2007). As suggested by Timperley (2005, p. 417), “distributing leadership over more people is a risky business and may result in the greater distribution of incompetence.” In addition the distribution of leadership in organisations has been linked to inefficiencies stemming from a larger number of leaders and associated disagreements over aims and priorities (Harris et al., 2007). Moreover, it has been suggested that teacher leaders may not command the respect of formal leaders which may in turn result in them being questioned and disrespected (Timperley, 2005). It is also possible that, contrary to popular assumption, teachers may not always desire their involvement in leadership practices. The literature on teacher participation in decision making suggests that this may very well be the case since teachers appear not to expect or desire their involvement in all decisions (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

The weaknesses discussed above point to several limitations applicable to the interpretations of distributed leadership found in the literature. The most important limitations include conceptual and definitional issues, research and measurement issues, and the validity of underlying assumptions. These limitations are further exacerbated by the lack of sufficient empirical evidence on the effects of distributed on educational outcomes.

**Transformational Leadership**

Even though transformational leadership does not appear to suffer from conceptual and definitional issues to the same degree as distributed leadership, it has also received a great deal of criticism. Several aspects of the transformational leadership model have been identified as problematic: According to critics, the model places too much emphasis on the transformational qualities of the leader, thereby reinforcing the notion that the principal is the sole source of leadership at the school (Evers & Lakomski, 1996; Stewart, 2006). However, according to Leithwood and Jantzi (2000), their transformational leadership model does not assume that the principal will be the only source of leadership in the organisation and is consistent with the sharing of leadership with teachers and other stakeholders.

Yukl (1999) has drawn attention to several conceptual weaknesses in transformational leadership theories. These include ambiguity in the underlying influence processes for transformational and transactional leadership. He suggests that these processes, which are used to explain the effects of the leader on his/her followers, should be clearly identified. Yukl also points to ambiguity in transformational leadership behaviours stemming from partially overlapping content and high-intercorrelation. Additional problems concern the omission from the MLQ of important behaviours derived from theories and research on effective leadership and the insufficient attention paid to the role of situational variables.

Evers and Lakomski (1996) argue that it is difficult to distinguish between transactional and transformational leadership behaviours and that this difficulty puts in question the findings of empirical research regarding the effects of transformational leadership. They also criticise the use of quantitative methodology by Leithwood and Bass, which they consider to be inappropriate because of the unpredictability of
transformational leadership as different types of leadership will emerge in different situations and/or points in time. In general, the literature points to several methodological issues, which include more specific measurement concerns linked to the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. In a review of two decades of research in transformational leadership, Bass (1999, p.18) acknowledges the following problems with the MLQ: “multicollinearity of its scales, lower than desired reliability under some circumstances for active managing-by-exception, and questions about the universality of the factor structure of the model of full range leadership.” However, it is important to note that some of the measurement and/or methodological concerns linked to transformational leadership research are applicable to some extent, to most, if not all, cases of quantitative survey research. Taking this into account, it must still be recognised that the measurement of the effects of transformational leadership on educational outcomes remains a challenge. Given that scholars have had limited success in measuring the effects of a single leader on outcomes, the measurement of the effects of transformational leadership is even more challenging since it does not assume that leadership is concentrated on the principal alone (Hallinger, 2003).

An additional issue concerns some of the findings of research on transformational leadership. Based on their findings in Australia, Barnett et al. (2001) argue that, contrary to the assumption of Bass and Avolio (1997), no conceptual differences can be identified between transformational leadership behaviours. In their study, teachers did not draw a distinction between the transformational leadership behaviour of charisma, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation. Moreover, they found that the teachers in their study did not distinguish between individual concern (transformational leadership behaviour) and contingent reward (transactional leadership behaviour). They considered this to be an indication that “transformational and transactional leadership practices are interwoven and that transformational leadership is effective when it manages to incorporate transactional practices” (Barnett et al., 2001, p. 42). Their most important finding concerned the fact that the transformational leadership behaviour of vision/inspiration was negatively associated with student learning culture. Barnett et al. (2001) suggested that visionary/inspirational principals may direct teachers’ efforts to wider school initiatives, thereby distracting them from their teaching and learning goals. If correct, this interpretation has negative implications for the transformational leadership model in relation to its presumed effects on student outcomes.

In summary, it appears that several limitations can be identified in the theory and research associated with transformational leadership models. However, as noted by Bass (1999), more basic research is necessary on the topic. As in the case of distributed leadership, the existing evidence is insufficient and cannot be considered to provide a reliable basis for conclusions on the role of transformational leadership in meeting the needs of the students and/or the educational system.

Implications
The review of the literature on two contemporary leadership models has noteworthy implications for future research. As regards distributed leadership, it is important that the conceptual and methodological challenges associated with this form of leadership be addressed. Even though it may be impossible to arrive at a “universal usage” of distributed leadership (Mayrowetz, 2008), research on the outcomes/effects of such leadership should be guided by a common understanding of what is meant by the distribution of leadership. This is necessary in order to ensure that findings are comparable and can be used to build a reliable evidence base which can in turn inform
policy and practice. The overview of the literature points to a tendency to focus exclusively on the theoretical foundation of distributed leadership, detaching it from practice. For instance, the relationship between distributed leadership and democratic leadership has intrigued scholars (see, for example, Gronn, 2008). Even though the refinement of the conceptual base of distributed leadership requires the exploration of its links with other conceptual domains, the key question for any leadership model remains whether it can contribute significantly to student outcomes. As Robinson (2008, p. 253) points out:

Arguments about more democratic forms of school organisation and the importance of teacher empowerment are, in themselves, inappropriate grounds for advocating greater distribution of leadership in schools. They are inappropriate because the ethical imperative of school leadership is to do what is in the interest of the children, not what is in the interest of the staff.

The literature suggests that, like distributed leadership, transformational leadership suffers from several shortcomings. Hallinger (2003) highlights the importance of the school context in studies of school leadership and recommends the incorporation of the contingent characteristics of school leadership into contemporary theoretical models. Day, Harris and Hadfield (2001) also point to the role of the context in effective leadership and argue that it is necessary to move beyond the polarisation associated with the concepts of transactional and transformational leadership. One direction for future research may be the exploration of the links between transformational leadership and other forms of leadership. Marks and Pinty (2003), for instance, call for more studies on ways in which transformational and instructional leadership complement each other and affect student learning.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for both theories lies in the resolution of existing methodological problems, which will, in turn, allow for more research on their effects on educational outcomes. Bass (1999) calls for the creation of new methods for measuring transformational leadership and points to the promise of laboratory methods in the identification of cause and effect relationships. The review of the literature clearly points to the need for more studies of the effects of distributed and transformational leadership on student outcomes. For, without more evidence on their effects on learning, transformational and distributed leadership run the risk of remaining intuitive conceptualisations of leadership, with limited or no impact on educational policy and practice.

References


