

Leadership and School Performances: An Exploratory Study of Transformational and Instructional Leadership Styles of the School Principals in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of school principals' transformational and instructional leadership styles on academic performance in Sri Lanka. School leadership is essential for increasing teacher effectiveness, student learning, and overall school quality, particularly in a highly centralized education system. The study uses a qualitative research approach and draws on secondary data from academic journal articles, research papers, and prior empirical studies on school leadership. A qualitative content analysis was utilised to uncover main themes regarding how leadership styles affect teacher motivation, school culture, instructional methods, and student accomplishment. According to the findings, transformational leadership improves teacher commitment, cooperation, and school culture by fostering shared vision, innovation, and ethical behaviours. Through monitoring, professional development, and curricular support, instructional leadership improves teaching quality and student academic success. However, many principals struggle to enact instructional leadership due to administrative overload and limited professional preparation, highlighting the need to strengthen leadership development to improve school performance in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, Instructional leadership, School performance, School principals, Sri Lanka, Educational leadership

INTRODUCTION

The leader is expected to play an important role in policymaking, with innovative adoption following suit. It is not recognised that there may be resistance or apathy toward change. It's thought that implementation is trouble-free. Several aspects of education support this unidimensional leadership trait. People and official organisations often treat the principal as the central authority and public face of the school, assuming responsibility for decision-making, communication, and institutional representation (Bush, 2010).

Begley and Johansson (1998, as cited in Norberg & Johansson, 2007) state that school administrators now have a greater variety of responsibilities and that their priorities for making decisions on staff, pupils, and internal and external character issues have become more complicated. Their decisions now frequently need the school leader to choose management solutions based on evaluation procedures as a basis for selecting different alternatives.

Many school leadership decisions convey normative and value-laden messages. From more straightforward choices like re-establishing moral order to more nuanced ideological concerns about children's education, these choices can take many forms. Professional staff credentials, class numbers, scheduling, revisions to in-service training, dispute resolution, and the setting of standards for behaviour, dress, and communication are important factors to take into account (Norberg & Johansson, 2007).

The education system aims to provide high-quality human resources for long-term development. School education provides the foundation for developing human resources by imparting knowledge, developing skills, and cultivating attitudes that foster individual and national growth. Schools' performance is heavily influenced by their leadership style and principal, making both criteria crucial to their survival. The function of the principal

has evolved significantly throughout time. Schools now primarily prepare students for the workforce. To achieve this goal, both school curricula and the principal's position need to be altered. The principal's leadership role is critical to improving teacher effectiveness. Thus, children's academic outcomes will improve with high-performing teachers. To enhance teacher effectiveness, principals should adopt goal-oriented teaching practices. Effective leadership is a key factor in determining success and failure (Fernando et al., 2023). This study examines how transformational and instructional leadership styles of school principals impact school performance in Sri Lanka.

Aims and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to investigate how Sri Lankan school performance is affected by principals' transformational and instructional leadership styles, with an emphasis on their effects on student outcomes, teacher practices, and overall school efficacy.

By answering these research questions, the goal will be accomplished.

1. How can transformational leadership approaches among school principals' impact teacher motivation and school culture in Sri Lankan schools?
2. How do school principals' instructional leadership approaches influence instructional quality and student academic performance?
3. What is the impact of transformational and instructional leadership styles on overall school performance in Sri Lankan schools?

BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka's educational history spans two millennia. The country's academic organization was simple and well-organised, with Gurugedara as a village school, Pirivena as a temple school, and Mahaviharaya as a higher education institute. The local teacher, known as "Gurunanse," offered basic schooling. Monks led secondary and tertiary education in temples. Colonial expansion since 1505 altered the traditional teaching system. The British implemented the modern teaching system in Sri Lanka following the Colebrook Commission's recommendations in 1836. The Portuguese and Dutch educational systems served as the foundation for the establishment of the British educational system. The British educational system, established later, has endured to this day. The most important person at the school was the "Head Master." He was responsible for ensuring the school's administrative and academic functions operated effectively. The title of "Head Master" was changed to "Principal" in the school due to social, economic, and political changes (Karunanayake, 2012).

Sri Lanka's free education system is complex and centralised. Although private schools typically have less bureaucracy than state-run institutions, they are still overseen by education ministries, religious institutions, directors, or awarding agencies that adhere to centralised education and examination procedures (Cabraal, 2022). According to the Ministry of Education (2019, as cited in Fernando, 2023), there are over 10,165 public schools in Sri Lanka, with about 4 million students enrolled. As mentioned by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2020, as cited in Fernando, 2023). Every year, the government allocates roughly 1.9% of its GDP to education. It may be claimed that each school's performance could be equal to or better than when the required resources are allocated to it. Nonetheless, some schools are said to perform well in both academic and extracurricular activities, while other schools have not reported any such accomplishments (Fernando, 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Leadership Style

The term "style" refers to how tasks are performed. A person's leadership style determines how they influence others in a society or organisation. Effective leadership in education requires balancing one's style with the tasks of others under their direction (Fernando et al., 2023). Leadership styles are characterised based on managers'

power, how they use it, and their behaviours. As a result, leadership styles can be broadly characterised as autocratic, democratic, or laissez-faire, distinguished by the degree of control managers' exercise over subordinates. Educational academics from the industrialized and Western world have explored various approaches to successful school leadership, including transformational, distributed, instructional, transactional, and ethical leadership models (Fernando et al., 2020).

School Performance

Some studies used GPA to measure school achievement, whereas others analysed test results, dropout rates, transfer rates, and participation rates. To assess school success, it's important to consider not just graduates' abilities and values, but also their level of experience in school. Academic scores are not the sole criterion. School performance refers to a broad range of educational outcomes, including knowledge, intellectual stimulation, vision, situational awareness, relationships, validation, culture, order, visibility, communication, and discipline. A school's non-academic performance is influenced by its leadership, culture, environment, academics, student focus, teacher commitment, school-community relations, student-teacher well-being, extracurricular activities, and student expectations of physical services (Fernando et al., 2013).

Transformational Leadership

Educational leadership has evolved in a much more conventional manner. Murphy (1991, as cited in Hopkins et al., 2014), for example, proposed that leadership thinking progresses through several stages, including a focus on trait theories of leadership, what leaders actually do, an awareness that task-related and people-centered behaviours can be interpreted differently, situational approaches to leadership, and an interest in the links between leader behaviour and organisational culture. This indicated a shift towards the concept of transformational leadership, which has the capacity to change the cultural framework in which individuals operate, as well as the possibility for school leaders to "drive" advances in student accomplishment (Hopkins et al., 2014).

Leithwood (1994, as cited in Bush, 2010), conceptualises that transformational leadership has eight dimensions:

1. Building school vision.
2. Establishing school goals.
3. Providing intellectual stimulation.
4. Offering individualised support.
5. Modelling best practices and important organisational values.
6. Demonstrating high performance expectations.
7. Creating a productive school culture.
8. Developing structures to foster participation in school decisions.

Transformational leaders set goals and objectives for their institutions. They offer unique ideas to improve school performance. TL involves building an organisation, creating a shared vision, distributing leadership, and fostering a school culture, all of which are crucial to school restructuring. They prioritise the success of their schools. These principles foster an environment that promotes exceptional performance. Many have contributed to their schools by creating new resources. Principals provide resources to help teachers and students implement school programs. Leaders using this style typically have strong ethical and moral standards. The transformational approach creates trust, respect, and a desire among followers to work together towards common future goals. As a result, transformational leadership promotes educational change while also improving organisational effectiveness and school culture (Fernando et al., 2020).

Instructional Leadership

However, by the turn of the twenty-first century, it became evident that while a transformational approach to leadership was required, it was insufficient for measurable school change. It lacked a clear focus on student learning, which is a critical component of this approach to school development. For this reason, the complementary historical notion of "instructional leadership" has gained popularity.

In the era of accountability, principals play a crucial role in school instruction. The principal's primary role is to enable successful learning and teaching to improve students' outcomes. To ensure school success, principals must act as instructional leaders in the teaching and learning processes. Principals oversee classroom teaching and learning processes. They are meant to facilitate teaching and learning. The principal is the school's leader and must be prepared to provide appropriate leadership. The principal must have high standards for work and behaviour. With his support, the rest of the school will follow where he or she leads (Safeek & Nawastheen, 2016). According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)(2001, as cited in Safeek & Nawastheen, 2016), instructional leadership involves fostering learning communities where staff members meet regularly to discuss work, solve problems, reflect on their roles, and take responsibility for student learning outcomes. As a result, instructional leadership refers to leadership that promotes learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a systematic qualitative literature review and thematic content analysis to investigate how school principals' transformational and instructional leadership styles influence school performance in Sri Lanka. The exploratory nature of this research, the need to synthesise fragmented knowledge across multiple school contexts, and resource constraints that hindered primary data collection all contributed to the decision to use a secondary data analysis approach.

A systematic search was conducted across Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, ProQuest Education Database, and ResearchGate using keywords such as "Sri Lanka," "school leadership," "transformational leadership," "instructional leadership," and "school performance." Additional sources were identified through citation tracking and relevant government reports. Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed empirical research published between 2010 and 2025, centred on Sri Lankan primary or secondary school leadership, investigated transformational and/or instructional leadership, and documented measurable outcomes. Studies that focused solely on higher education, non-empirical opinion pieces, or lacked a defined methodology were excluded. The initial search generated 87 sources; after filtering, 12 empirical research papers comprised the main dataset, which was augmented by 8 government papers for context.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analysed in four systematic phases. First, each chosen study was read twice to guarantee familiarity and contextual knowledge. The initial open coding identified unique leadership behaviours, observed outcomes, contextual elements, difficulties, and supporting situations. A total of 127 initial codes were created, including examples like "principal provides instructional resources," "teacher motivation through intellectual stimulation," and "Type 1C school leadership constraints."

Second, the initial codes were classified into broader analytical categories using thematic analysis. For example, codes relating to classroom monitoring and curriculum collaboration were grouped under the category "Instructional Leadership Practices." This process yielded six primary themes: (1) transformational leadership influences teacher motivation; (2) transformational leadership influences school culture; (3) instructional leadership influences teaching quality; (4) instructional leadership influences student academic performance; (5) systemic constraints limit leadership effectiveness; and (6) contextual variations by school type and location.

Third, findings from many studies were rigorously analysed to uncover convergent and divergent patterns, as well as contextual modifiers. Variations were analysed by school type (Type 1AB versus Type 1C), geographic location, and principal experience.

Fourth, the synthesised themes were analysed using Leithwood's transformational leadership dimensions and the instructional leadership framework proposed by Leithwood and Riehl to determine how Sri Lankan findings align with or contradict established leadership theories.

Several quality assurance methods were used to improve methodological rigour. The constant comparison method was used to assess emergent themes against fresh data to guarantee appropriate interpretation. Instead of focusing solely on positive results, negative-case analysis was employed to actively identify contradictory data. Direct quotes were retained from the original research to allow interpretations to be evaluated independently. By deliberately seeking evidence of leadership limitations and systemic restraints, potential researcher bias, particularly the tendency to view leadership as the main driver of improvement, was reduced. To ensure authenticity, participant quotations remained intact, and all sources were properly cited.

Limitations

This approach has significant limitations. The study is limited by the available published research, and it may overlook areas that have not been thoroughly investigated. Secondary analysis cannot capture the real-time experiences or rich circumstances that original data collection can provide. Published research may show disproportionately good results, thereby overestimating leadership effectiveness. The study period runs from 2010 to 2025, during which time the Sri Lankan educational context may have transformed. The findings are exclusive to Sri Lankan public schools and may not apply to other environments. Qualitative synthesis entails interpretive judgements that another researcher may construct differently. Only English-language sources were considered, potentially leaving out relevant Sinhala or Tamil media. Despite these limitations, this systematic method establishes a solid framework for understanding transformational and instructional leadership in Sri Lankan schools and suggests areas for additional primary research.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section provides a thematic synthesis of the findings across the three study topics. Rather than summarising individual research in order, findings are linked across studies to highlight trends, inconsistencies, and contextual variances in how transformational and instructional leadership affect school performance in Sri Lanka.

Transformational Leadership's Impacts on Teacher Motivation and School Culture

Multiple studies have found that transformational leadership consistently has a positive impact on teacher motivation and school culture across a variety of Sri Lankan environments. Nanthakumar et al. (2021) used quantitative data from 183 teachers at Colombo private schools to discover strong positive correlations between transformational leadership and teacher performance, with affective commitment acting as a mediating variable. Principals who exhibited intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation received significantly higher teacher performance ratings. The mechanism works through three interconnected processes: vision-sharing, which fosters a sense of shared purpose; intellectual stimulation, which promotes innovation and professional progress; and individualised support, which boosts teacher confidence and exhibits genuine concern for development. These findings, interpreted through Leithwood's transformational leadership framework, indicate that vision-building, intellectual stimulation, and individualised support are essential means by which principals influence motivation and culture in Sri Lankan schools.

Transformational leadership also significantly changes school culture. Karunakaran et al. (2019) found statistically significant relationships between principal transformational leadership and school culture characteristics among 158 teachers from plantation-based schools in the Nuwara-Eliya and Ratnapura districts. This discovery is especially significant given the challenging context these schools have been neglected for over 30 years, face accessibility challenges, and serve populations with adult literacy rates of only 66%, compared to the national norm of 92%. Even in resource-constrained environments, transformational leadership led to observable cultural shifts. The reforms included improved communication lines with principals who were available to teachers and students, collaborative problem-solving orientations rather than top-down commands, ethical cultures based on value modelling, and innovative mindsets that encouraged new approaches to teaching.

Fernando et al. (2023) studied the academic consequences of transformational leadership and identified three principals with transformational styles whose schools performed exceptionally well. These schools have GCE Ordinary Level pass rates of 93%, 79%, and 99%, with GCE Advanced Level university admission rates of 84.08%, 62.42%, and 61.92%, respectively. Two-thirds of these colleges excelled in areas other than academics, such as athletics. The principals increased communication by allowing teachers and students to meet with them at any time, providing resources for implementing school initiatives, and setting high ethical and moral standards. One principal explained that "teachers and students are motivated by providing all the facilities they need to make the teaching learning process more efficient and effective."

Transformative leadership's effectiveness varies by environment, showing the greatest impact in urban private schools due to increased principal autonomy and better resources. While plantation-sector schools experience positive effects, they need longer time frames and consistent effort. In Sri Lanka, transformational leadership proves effective even with limited resources, as principals can communicate vision and values without requiring significant financial means, unlike instructional leadership, which often requires more time and authority that are often lacking.

Instructional Leadership: Implications for Teaching Quality and Student Academic Performance

The evidence on instructional leadership reveals a more complex and contradictory trend. While instructional leadership is supposed to drive teaching quality and student achievement through curriculum coordination, classroom supervision, professional development support, and student progress monitoring, Sri Lankan principals face significant challenges in fulfilling these roles effectively. Using instructional leadership theory as an analytic lens, the findings indicate that, while curriculum supervision and professional development are theoretically important, structural limitations in Sri Lanka usually prevent principals from carrying out these tasks.

Some research found that successful implementation led to good effects. Safeek and Nawastheen (2016) used the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale to survey 33 principals at Tamil-medium schools in the Puttalam district, and discovered that 60% had positive perceptions of their instructional leadership positions. These principals aggressively promoted teacher professional development and worked to inspire pupils. Notably, administrators with 15-20 years of experience were actively driving the classroom teaching and learning process while indirectly influencing students' academic achievement. Even in this somewhat good sample, student progress tracking and internal oversight fell short of expectations, indicating inadequate implementation.

Kumari (2023) found that all four primary school principals interviewed had prior experience in instructional leadership, indicating that principals' traditional functions have shifted into these roles. These principals used innovative techniques to address implementation issues, focusing on instructional supervision, feedback on instruction, the supply of instructional materials, and the preservation of instructional time. In Type 1AB schools offering the entire range of GCE A/L subjects, a significant majority of teachers (88%) had positive perceptions of principals' instructional leadership responsibilities, and these principals performed instructional leadership functions adequately.

However, several studies have found that severe limitations prevent effective instructional leadership in a variety of circumstances. The most constant conclusion is that principals' general administrative tasks consume the time and energy required for instructional leadership. A Type 1C school principal addressed this challenge: "As a principal, I face many challenges in implementing instructional leadership roles because I also engage in general administration. Due to this reason, I find it difficult to find time to supervise and evaluate the instructional process and provide feedback for teachers' professional development." This is a basic structural issue in which job design discourages instructional leadership.

Kumari (2023b) found considerable differences between school types. While 1AB principals successfully implemented instructional leadership, Type 1C principals who oversee schools that offer only arts and commerce streams fail to fulfill their instructional leadership responsibilities because they have more general administrative responsibilities than instructional leadership time. The implications are measurable: students in 1AB schools

achieve higher educational standards than students in Type 1-C schools, implying that principals' failure to provide instructional leadership contributes to low academic achievement.

These issues are further complicated by additional constraints. Multiple studies found insufficient pre-service and in-service leadership training, suggesting that principals learn leadership through trial and error rather than through systematic preparation. Fernando et al. (2020) discovered that principals lack the authority to select staff, substantially impeding their ability to form successful teaching teams. Kumari (2023) indicated that Type 1C principals face considerable challenges in retaining competent, experienced teachers, who frequently seek transfers to better-resourced 1AB schools. Instructional leadership becomes extremely difficult without responsibility over hiring and retention. Furthermore, although supervision is crucial to instructional leadership, several studies indicate that it is poorly implemented, with principals less likely to supervise teachers, even though instructional supervision is critical for professional growth.

As a result, there is a mixed link between academic performance and instructional leadership. Type 1AB schools with outstanding academic performance and instructional leadership were evident in their high pass and university admission rates. However, Fernando et al. (2023) discovered that in limited settings, schools with principals who prioritised instructional leadership above transformative approaches "have not improved significantly" in academic and non-academic performance, with "achievement levels low." This surprising discovery highlights a concerning paradox: although instructional leadership is thought to improve outcomes, systemic limitations prevent most Sri Lankan principals from putting it into practice. When structural conditions are favourable, instructional leadership seems to be effective; when conditions are not, it fails.

Systemic Obstacles to Effective Leadership

The findings revealed an important overarching theme: systemic variables outside of principals' control severely limit the effectiveness of leadership. Fernando et al. (2020, 2023) reported that leadership influence was affected by several resource deficiencies. Because of financial constraints, many schools find it difficult to raise money for the School Development Funds, which are the main source of funding, and administrators struggle to meet goals due to limited resources. Numerous Central Colleges have inadequate furnishings and need structural renovations, demonstrating the pervasiveness of physical infrastructure deficiencies. Teacher shortages in a variety of areas, especially in advanced-level courses, and a lack of non-academic staff force teachers to take on secretarial duties.

Principal preparation is severely limited by gaps in training and development. Every study that examined principal training concluded that it was insufficient, with few opportunities for principals to receive leadership training at appropriate stages of their careers. This limits effectiveness right away since principals acquire leadership via experience rather than formal training. Leadership is further limited by restrictions on authority and autonomy. In Sri Lanka's centralised system, principals have little control over the makeup of the workforce because they are not authorised to hire employees. Principals are unable to retain bright teachers or form productive teams because staffing decisions are made at the provincial or ministry level.

These limits have a fundamental impact on what leadership can do. Fernando et al. (2020) observed that resource constraints affect academic achievement and pose challenges for school administration and control systems, suggesting that even exceptional leadership cannot fully compensate for resource and structural deficits. The consequence is clear: leadership development alone is insufficient for school transformation without structural reforms that address resources, training, and authority.

Critical Insights and Comparative Patterns

A review of the evidence reveals several important trends. First, even in contexts with limited resources, transformational leadership consistently improves school culture and teacher motivation across a range of scenarios. Second, due to administrative overburden, insufficient training, and limited power, instructional leadership is severely constrained in Type 1C schools and under-resourced environments, despite demonstrating efficacy in well-resourced Type 1AB schools. Third, these leadership styles are reflected in school performance: transformational principal-led schools exhibit excellent academic and non-academic outcomes, while schools

with principals unable to fulfill their instructional responsibilities show little progress. Fourth, a lack of resources, inadequate training, and insufficient authority are among the systemic barriers that keep many principals from implementing effective leadership, regardless of style. Fifth, context is important. The effectiveness of leadership varies greatly depending on the type of school, region, and industry.

These findings challenge conventional leadership theories and demonstrate that pushing for instructional leadership without addressing systemic impediments is an unsuccessful strategy. The findings imply that transformational leadership may be required in Sri Lankan contexts, providing cultural and motivational circumstances for instructional leadership to emerge when systemic supports are eventually supplied. However, neither leadership style can overcome the fundamental structural limits identified in this research.

DISCUSSION

A Comprehensive Framework for School Leadership in Sri Lanka

According to the combined results, transformational and instructional leadership are complementary strategies whose efficacy is heavily reliant on systemic supportive factors. This study presents an integrative framework tailored to Sri Lanka's specific context. Transformational leadership functions as the foundational layer, creating organisational culture, teacher motivation, and collaborative climate necessary for effective instruction. Instructional leadership operates as the operational layer, translating vision into concrete improvements in teaching quality and student learning.

Systemic limitations such as the availability of resources, principal preparation and training, administrative load relative to instructional time, and organisational decision-making authority, however, mediate both leadership characteristics. The varying efficacy shown among school types can be explained by this mediation. Both leadership philosophies can work well and yield impressive results in schools with systemic support, such as Type 1AB schools. Only transformational leadership can survive in situations without support, such as in Type 1C and plantation schools.

The framework explains why transformational leadership has more consistent positive benefits in various circumstances. It can function even when systemic restrictions are severe since vision articulation, value modelling, and individualised support do not require significant financial or staffing resources. Despite minimal material resources, a plantation school principal can nonetheless encourage teachers, express high expectations, and foster collaboration.

In contrast, instructional leadership requires structural support, which many Sri Lankan principals lack. Effective instructional leadership requires time to observe classrooms and provide feedback, authority to allocate professional development resources, the ability to systematically track student achievement, and control over staffing to create effective teaching teams. Principals cannot fulfil instructional leadership duties without these resources, regardless of their abilities or motives. This explains why Fernando et al. (2023) discovered that schools focused on instructional leadership in constrained circumstances showed little growth despite administrators' efforts.

The framework proposes a developmental sequence for school improvement in resource-constrained environments. Transformational leadership must first provide the cultural groundwork by cultivating trust, creating a shared vision, motivating teachers, and encouraging creativity. Only when this foundation is established can instructional leadership be effectively put in place, provided systemic constraints are addressed concurrently through resource allocation, training provision, and authority redistribution. Attempting instructional leadership without the cultural basis or structural supports yields dismal results.

Critical Evaluation: Sri Lankan Reality Compared to Theory

The results reveal notable conflicts between Sri Lankan implementation reality and Western leadership theories. Leithwood's transformational leadership paradigm emphasises fostering a positive school climate, stimulating students' minds, and developing a clear vision. These dimensions seem doable even in environments with limited

resources and are in good agreement with Sri Lankan data. The robust benefits reported by Karunakaran et al. (2019) and Nanthakumar et al. (2021) confirm the cross-cultural applicability of transformative leadership.

However, instructional leadership demonstrates a fundamental mismatch between theory and reality. Western conceptions assume principals have significant autonomy in hiring and evaluating staff, dedicated time for classroom observation, with administrative responsibilities delegated to assistant principals, resources for meaningful professional development, and the authority to make curriculum decisions. Sri Lankan principals have almost none of these capabilities.

The centralised education system delegated staffing authority to the Ministry and Provincial offices rather than to school principals. Principals lack administrative officers to do clerical tasks; they must manage finances, facilities, and compliance reporting alone. Professional development resources are scarce and unequally distributed. This structural reality renders instructional leadership as envisioned in Western models practically impossible to achieve.

This discrepancy explains the remarkable discovery that schools that concentrated on instructional leadership under restrictive conditions made little progress. According to one Type 1C principal, administrative duties take up time that could be spent on teacher development and instructional monitoring. Instead of a lack of leadership ability, this is a structural impossibility. Without support workers, there are not enough hours to complete in-depth instructional leadership duties and considerable administrative responsibilities.

The findings also explain why Type 1AB schools have more successful instructional leadership implementation. These schools gain from higher enrolments, which generate more resources; full subject offerings, which attract experienced teachers; stronger academic reputations, which create positive cycles; and increased attention from education officials. These structural advantages, rather than superior principal leadership, allow instructional leadership to function as Western theories predict. The success of instructional leadership is largely determined by organisational variables beyond the principal's control.

Systemic boundaries and their implications

The evidence repeatedly shows that systemic resource restrictions are the most significant barrier to school improvement. Financial constraints lead schools to rely on School Development Funds donated by students' families, resulting in equity disparities where schools serving impoverished areas have fewer resources. Physical infrastructure deficiencies, such as deteriorated facilities and insufficient furnishings, directly affect teaching and learning, regardless of leadership quality. Human resource limitations, notably teacher shortages in essential courses and a lack of support staff, force administrators to make difficult choices between instructional leadership and basic operational functions.

These restrictions have serious consequences for policy and practice. First, leadership development projects that lack contemporary resource investments will provide poor results. Training principals in instructional leadership strategies while they are swamped with administrative tasks only leads to frustration. Second, comparing school achievement without accounting for resource differences is fundamentally unjust. Judging Type 1C principals with the same standards as Type 1AB principals ignores significantly different circumstances.

Third, emphasising principal leadership may unintentionally divert attention away from important structural adjustments. While leadership is important, research reveals that resource allocation, personnel rules, and organisational design are more important for schools in constrained environments. The findings from the plantation schools show that leadership can make a difference even in severely disadvantaged settings, but improvements require sustained effort over the long term and are subject to resource shocks.

Policy recommendations

According to this investigation, several steps could improve leadership effectiveness and school performance. At the national level, the Ministry of Education should establish six-month mandatory pre-service principal training programs that encompass transformational and instructional leadership competencies, organisational

management, and Sri Lankan education policy contexts. Principals are now learning by trial and error, squandering valuable early years in the profession.

Administrative officers should be assigned to perform clerical work, financial reporting, and facilities management in schools with enrolments beyond a specific level as part of a Principal Time Protection policy. Principals would have more time to devote to instructional leadership as a result. Reforms in resource distribution should use diversified financing methods to direct more funds toward Type 1C schools, plantation schools, and rural schools that are struggling the most.

Staffing strategies must address teacher retention in disadvantaged schools by providing incentive structures, such as wage differentials or faster promotion opportunities, for teachers serving in difficult conditions. The present trend of experienced teachers moving to better schools hinders leadership initiatives. Principals must have significant authority within accountability frameworks, specifically the capacity to participate substantively in teacher hiring choices and provide feedback on retention and transfer decisions.

Education departments should establish quarterly professional learning communities at the provincial and zonal levels to enable principals to exchange best practices and learn from accomplished colleagues. At least one administrative assistant should be assigned to each school to manage routine paperwork, and senior teachers and vice principals should form school leadership teams to assign leadership responsibilities.

The research's successful scenarios demonstrate several practical approaches for contemporary principals working in limited environments. Before resorting to extensive instructional supervision, principals should first use transformational approaches to foster a positive school culture and inspire instructors. To avoid implementing unsustainable comprehensive supervision systems, instructional leadership efforts should focus on high-leverage activities such as frequent classroom visits, targeted feedback on specific improvements, and promoting peer learning among teachers once cultural foundations have been established.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study shows that effective school leadership in Sri Lanka necessitates both a transformational vision to establish culture and motivation and an instructional emphasis to improve teaching and learning, despite its limitations stemming from reliance on secondary data and a focus on public state schools. Nevertheless, despite their qualifications, many principals are unable to fulfill instructional leadership responsibilities due to systemic limitations. According to the suggested integrative framework, transformational leadership is essential in Sri Lankan contexts, fostering an environment that enables instructional leadership to develop through systemic supports. By assuming organisational settings fundamentally different from Sri Lankan realities, where processes, resource constraints, and administrative responsibilities shape what principals can actually accomplish, this approach questions the wholesale adoption of Western leadership models.

To enhance Sri Lankan education, authorities must recognise that leadership development alone will not improve schools; it must be combined with structural reforms that address resource distribution, teacher retention, administrative burdens, and principal authority. Schools serving underprivileged populations require both outstanding leadership and substantial resources; Type 1C schools require not only better-trained principals but also more teachers, better facilities, and sufficient resources to retain competent educators. Future longitudinal research and primary data gathering would provide richer insights, particularly into successful principals who achieve results despite limits. Only through comprehensive reform that integrates leadership development with systemic change, developing principals' transformational and instructional leadership capabilities while simultaneously reforming resource allocation, staffing policies, and organisational structures, the Sri Lankan education system can realise its goal of providing high-quality education that develops the human resources required for long-term national development.

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