

A Critical Investigation into Transformational Leadership and Its Relevance to Universities in China

Shenyue Wang*

Department of Humanities, Nanjing University of Science and Technology Zijin College, Nanjing 210023, Jiangsu Province, China

*Corresponding author: Shenyue Wang, faygxdx123@126.com

Copyright: © 2024 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: At present, transformation and innovation have become an important topic for the development of schools. Transformational leadership is a significant driving force in school reform and development. The management of Chinese universities has to transform to adapt to the rapidly changing social environment. This paper focuses on the intention and effectiveness of transformational leadership, and how it can be applied to improving the school management of Chinese universities. Firstly, the paper discusses the concept and main dimensions of transformational leadership. Secondly, the role of transformational leadership in the school is analyzed from three aspects, which are students, teachers, and school organization. Next, the paper discusses the limitations of transformational leadership. Subsequently, the paper shows the current situation and main problems of the school management of Chinese universities. Lastly, the paper gives suggestions to school management of Chinese universities in the light of transformational leadership based on previous studies.

Keywords: Chinese universities; Leader; School; Transformational leadership

Online publication: 27 February, 2024

1. Introduction

Modern society is in a stage of rapid transition, and there is a lot of uncertainty in the current times. Transformation is an irresistible trend now, which has a great impact on people's lives. Social change poses serious challenges to education, so education also requires transformation. Transformational leadership has been popular in school practices in recent years^[1]. Nedelcu said that transformational leadership is the key strength for school reform and transformation. It is an essential way of promoting teachers' professional development and the essential basis of enhancing students' academic achievement^[2]. Leithwood and his colleagues pointed out that the theory of transformational leadership puts emphasis on values and emotions, and it defines the role of leaders, which makes things become meaningful to the followers^[3]. Thus, the application of transformational leadership to school is significant and deserves studying. Education institutions like Chinese universities have to make transformations to adapt to today's situation. School management problems are particularly serious in

Chinese universities, and they impede the further development of universities in China. Thus, it is necessary for Chinese universities to transform their way of school management. Compared with foreign research in the area of transformational leadership, domestic studies are still relatively lagging in content and method, and the number of research is insufficient. In this paper, the author reviews previous researches which correspond to four research questions related to transformational leadership:

- (1) What is the connotation of transformational leadership?
- (2) What benefits does transformational leadership have on school?
- (3) What is the limitation of transformational leadership?
- (4) How can transformational leadership be used to improve the school management of Chinese universities?

2. The connotation and dimensions of transformational leadership

2.1. The connotation of transformational leadership

Downton initially coined the term “transformational leadership” in 1973. Although he created the foundation for transformational leadership, his influence in this field was very limited. The theory of transformational leadership first appears in the famous book *Leadership* by political sociologist Burns, which links leaders and the staff together and tries to excite the ethics and motivation between leaders and the staff^[4]. It is a new concept that means leaders attempt to make the staff be clear about the importance of their duties and missions through the appeal and charm of the leadership, as well as intellectual stimulation and personalized care. Then, the potential of the staff will be fully exploited to achieve the best degree of performance. Leithwood and his colleagues brought the theory of transformational leadership to educational settings. They clearly proposed the concept of school transformational leadership. Hallinger explained that transformational leadership in school refers to the principal’s capability of advancing teachers’ recognition of school objectives, improving teachers’ internal need level, stimulating teachers to continue to make progress, and achieving school sustainable development^[1].

After reading literature related to this theme, the author finds that the connotation of transformational leadership in school contains three aspects. The first one is that school transformational leadership represents the school leaders’ capabilities and the interaction process between school leaders and teachers. The second meaning is that school transformational leadership directly acts on teachers, so as to affect the teacher’s internal state, especially the respect of motivation and values. The third one is that the school has the burden of promoting students’ development. No matter how the school makes changes and transforms, the ultimate aim is to help students gain better development^[2,5].

2.2. The main dimensions of transformational leadership

Western scholars further explored the main dimensions of transformational leadership after its concept was put forward. Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration were proposed by Bass and Avolio in 1994. These four dimensions form transformative leadership together, and they are interdependent. Idealized influence refers to the leader’s firm belief and value in the organization. Inspirational motivation refers to the leader’s vision of the school’s development and encouragement to members about achieving meaningful goals. Intellectual stimulation is that leaders inspire members to come up with new ideas and ways and encourage members to actively express their views on organizational change. Leaders’ attention to and listening to the personal development needs and wishes of organizational members is called individualized consideration^[6]. Leithwood and his colleagues summed up transformational leadership

in the school situation in 1999 and summarized three dimensions of the practice of transformational leadership in schools. The first one is setting a direction, which refers to the development of vision and order formed by all school members participating in decision-making. The second one is personnel development, which means that leaders look forward to the development and achievements of the faculty and provide material and spiritual guarantees for their development. The third one is to redesign the organization, form a strong campus culture through getting involved in decision-making, and establish the core values of the organization ^[7].

3. The role of transformational leadership in school

Transform always belongs to the creators, thinkers, and leaders of the times. Transformational leadership has an idealized impact which enables the staff to trust leaders and have a good relationship with leaders. Transformational leadership is inspiring, and this is reflected in the vision and expectation that leaders have in everything they do. Transformational leadership is able to encourage the staff to immerse themselves into thinking by stimulating their intelligence. During the study process of the role of transformational leadership in schools, the author finds that students, teachers, and the school organization are three aspects to be reckoned with.

3.1. The effect of transformational leadership on students

Transformational leadership is beneficial to students. Anderson found that school leadership is quite an essential factor in student achievement and excellent performance ^[5]. Student learning outcomes are greatly influenced by transformational leadership ^[8,9]. Lv's study mentioned that the principal indirectly influences students' learning results by discussing and cooperating with teachers, participating in the establishment of school teaching goals, and creating a positive campus cultural atmosphere ^[10]. Bolkan and Goodboy's study revealed that transformational leadership is also beneficial to the participation of students in class, and students' cognition of teacher reliability ^[8]. However, the purpose of school education is not only to improve student performance but also to pay attention to the physical and mental health of students and constantly develop the personality of students. Therefore, future research should be based on the well-rounded development of students, and test the influence of the school's transformational leadership on students more scientifically.

3.2. The effect of transformational leadership on teachers

Transformational leadership is beneficial to teachers. The study of Leithwood *et al.* illustrated that the leaders of transformational leadership primarily have an influence on teachers by developing them. It includes setting an example to teachers, giving teachers individualized care, intelligence inspiration, and building a common vision ^[11]. Some researchers find that transformational leadership has a marked effect on teachers' organization promises, participation in academic activities, and job satisfaction ^[12,13]. Zhao and Xi's research demonstrated that transformational leadership has a remarkable effect on teachers' job satisfaction. Nevertheless, if leaders pay too much attention to teachers' personal goals and satisfy teachers only with wages, they can no longer cause teachers' job satisfaction. In this case, principals need to lead teachers with deeper values, clearer shared visions and goals, and impel teachers to realize their own needs from the perspective of school organizational development and transformation ^[14].

3.3. The effect of transformational leadership on the school organization

Transformational leadership can benefit the school organization. In the research on the utility of transformational leadership on the organization of schools, schools' organizational culture, school atmosphere,

and organizational learning are generally considered. Teaching improvement, working environment, common goals, and decision-making of school are all directly linked to transformational leadership. The book of Leithwood *et al.* illustrates that transformational leaders of schools attempt to benefit the school organization by creating a sort of organizational culture that is meaningful and positive. It has been found that several dimensions of transformational leadership are strongly connected to the school atmosphere in the study by McCarley *et al.* ^[15]. The research results by Manshadi *et al.* showed that transformational leadership can positively affect organizational learning, and it is the most essential component of predicting organizational learning ^[16]. The findings of the previous documents suggest that school transformational leadership has a positive effect on school organization. In addition, it can promote the learning of students and the teaching of teachers through its impact on school organization.

All in all, it can be concluded from the previous literature that transformational leadership can affect students' learning outcomes, class participation, and cognition of teacher credibility. It is good for teachers' organizational commitment and job satisfaction and leads the teachers to realize positive development. Transformational leadership ameliorates the school organization in school climate, organizational culture, and organizational learning. Previous researchers have done a lot about the effectiveness of transformational leadership. In spite of this, scholars still need to develop assessment tools that are applicable to different cultures and situations based on a common theoretical basis.

4. The limitations of transformational leadership

According to the point of view of Bass, transformational leadership works for any situation or culture, and it is always good for the organization and followers ^[6]. Obviously, this statement ignores the contextual applicability of transformational leadership. The study by Yukl pointed out that transformational leadership sometimes can also have an adverse effect on the organization. For example, if members of the organization are affected by the competitive visions of different leaders at the same time, the roles of the members of the organization will be more blurred and role conflicts will be greater. Eventually, organizational effectiveness will decline. As for the context of school, too much school work will be set back if teachers and other staff of the school are led by leaders with different school development plans ^[17]. Therefore, it can be seen that transformational leadership is not applicable in all environments and it has negative effects occasionally. Moreover, most transformational leadership theories acquiesce that the achievements of the organization are attributed to the leader's own abilities and their encouragement of the followers' work ^[18]. Leaders unilaterally guide followers to work hard and make self-sacrifice. Transformational leadership tells leaders to motivate their followers' struggles and help them grow. However, it does not involve the contents about the ways leaders encourage followers to put up with improvement suggestions to their plans and ideas, which might be quite useful for getting more comprehensive solutions ^[17]. In school, if the principals merely make decisions for everything instead of listening to teachers' ideas, it will not be conducive to the development of the school.

5. Application of transformational leadership to improve school management of Chinese universities

5.1. The present situation of the school management of Chinese universities

In the past 40 years since the Chinese reform and opening-up, China's higher education has been expanding. Students with higher education are no longer a minority, but a majority. With the continuous deepening of the reform, the management behavior of Chinese universities is also changing from a passive, strategic,

administrative, and closed traditional management mode to a modern management mode. The ultimate aim of universities is to cultivate high-quality and comprehensive talents, thus it can meet the development needs of various industries in the society. At present, due to the widespread concern of society, the educational work of Chinese universities will meet new opportunities and challenges ^[19].

Xuan and Zhong's research analyzed the shortcomings and deficiencies of the school management of Chinese universities. One problem is that the management of the principals of Chinese universities is too rigid. It basically relies on criticism, punishment, or temptation to make teachers work hard and maintain the teaching order of the school. Consequently, teachers are prone to generate negative emotions, and schools may lose some good teachers. One problem is that the short-term behavior of Chinese university principals is relatively obvious. It reflects in that the principal makes every effort to present the school results that superior leaders would like to see in response to the school evaluations conducted by the education department. However, they have forgotten that academic development is the fundamental responsibility of the university, and they have given up in-depth thinking and long-term planning for the development of the university. Another problem is that the administrative power of principals of Chinese universities is too large. The problem of replacing and interfering with academic power is very serious in the university. These problems have severely restricted the development of the school ^[20]. Therefore, it is time for the universities to adjust their way of school management, which is significant for producing more high-quality talents for society.

5.2. Advice for improving the school management of Chinese universities based on transformational leadership

- (1) Building a shared vision in the school: Instead of chasing after the requirements of upper departments, it is wiser for university leaders to put more effort into setting the university's own common development target. Bass and Avolio expounded that transformational leaders give the staff confidence and tell them how to achieve the shared vision. Leaders should also show their resolution to manage it. At the same time, for the common vision that has been built, the principal must lead the school collective to move forward solidly and turn the resistance encountered in the process into motivation ^[6]. Idealized influence, individualized support, and inspirational motivation play an important role in strengthening the shared vision of the organization ^[21]. They make teachers filled with responsibility and a sense of mission. In practice, university principals must understand the goal and significance of Chinese educational reform correctly, and transform them into educational concepts. They should embed educational concepts into the minds of every teacher, and let the teachers turn the concepts into behavior spontaneously. They can make unique but reasonable development plans for the university through self-assessment, group discussions, and field comparisons ^[19]. In this way, the university will become a distinctive school in light of its own development.
- (2) Shaping cohesive school organizational culture: School organizational culture refers to the value system created and accumulated by the school in the long-term education practice, which is recognized by school members. As school autonomy is strengthened and the diversity of students and teachers is increasing, university leaders are facing the challenge of how to establish a harmonious learning and working environment and campus culture ^[22]. Transformational leaders compare the success of an organization with its setbacks, which affect the followers' values and beliefs. All four dimensions of transformational leadership help connect the members' concept to the task of the organization ^[23]. Universities need to build their own campus culture, so that every faculty member will hold a sense of faith in the school. Shaping a cohesive organizational culture is also conducive to letting the faculty

maintain a good understanding of each other, have mutual respect and mutual trust, and create a healthy working atmosphere. If university members understand their school's organizational culture and let it penetrate into their own behavior, then the principals do not have to regulate the discipline by relying on a strict reward and punishment system.

- (3) Enhancing the professionalism of the school management team: The team not only refers to the school leaders but also includes all the teaching administrators. It is necessary for university leaders to have solid professional knowledge and mature leadership. University leaders should also exert strong decision-making ability, form a unique management style, hold a rigorous working attitude, and be highly responsible towards the school. In view of transformational leadership, leaders should respect each member of the organization and give them sufficient support and encouragement, as well as help them plan their direction of future development^[24]. The study by Jiang mentioned that transformational leadership believes that the exertion of teachers' capabilities is a reflection of organizational development, and is the key to schools' efforts to build themselves into better schools. It is a process of constantly giving challenges to teachers with new ideas and methods, and encouraging teachers' organization work^[19]. Besides, school leaders should also understand the process of students' physical and mental development, possess the knowledge and practical skills of education and teaching, master scientific and effective methods of evaluating students, have a healthy and positive attitude to dealing with student affairs, and have the willingness to keep learning and the potential of self-development^[20].

6. Conclusion

To sum up, transformational leadership has far-reaching effects in many areas of society. It makes people value the high-level needs and self-actualization of each individual, encourages individuals to seek better development, and believes that individuals own unlimited potential^[24]. Transformational leadership is recognized as one of the main ways to promote the transformation of schools^[1,25]. It has a positive impact on students, teachers, and school organizations, though it has some limitations. Future studies should focus on the applicability of transformational leadership to different contexts, and put more emphasis on the positive significance of followers to the organization. In the era of China's education reform, Chinese universities should actively learn from Western transformational leadership theories, in order to advance university reforms, improve education quality, and cultivate more high-quality talents for the society. Based on the theory of transformational leadership, this paper provided suggestions for the methods of ameliorating the school management of Chinese universities.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Hallinger P, 2003, Leading Educational Change: Reflections on the Practice of Instructional and Transformational Leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3): 329–352.
- [2] Nedelcu A, 2013, Transformational Approach to School Leadership: Contribution to Continued Improvement of Education. *Manager*, 2013(17): 237–244.
- [3] Leithwood K, Jantzi D, 2005, A Review of Transformational School Leadership Research 1996–2005. *Leadership*

and Policy in Schools, 4(3): 177–199.

- [4] Burns JM, 1978, *Leadership*, Harper & Row, New York, 181.
- [5] Anderson M, 2017, Transformational Leadership in Education: A Review of Existing Literature. *International Social Science Review*, 93(1): 4.
- [6] Bass BM, Avolio BJ, (eds.), 1994, *Improving Organizational Effectiveness Through Transformational Leadership*, Sage Publications, New York.
- [7] Leithwood K, Jantzi D, Steinbach R, 1999, *Changing Leadership for Changing Times*, McGraw-Hill Education, UK.
- [8] Bolkan S, Goodboy AK, 2009, Transformational Leadership in the Classroom: Fostering Student Learning, Student Participation, and Teacher Credibility. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 36(4): 296–306.
- [9] Sun J, Leithwood K, 2012, Transformational School Leadership Effects on Student Achievement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 11(4): 418–451.
- [10] Lv Y, 2017, Research on the Impact of Principal Leadership on Students' Academic Performance in American Academia. *Foreign Elementary and Secondary Education*, 2017(3): 44–49.
- [11] Leithwood K, Tomlinson D, Genge M, 1996, Transformational School Leadership, in *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration*, Springer, Dordrecht, 785–840.
- [12] Raman A, Cheah HM, Don Y, et al., 2015, Relationship Between Principals' Transformational Leadership Style and Secondary School Teachers' Commitment. *Asian Social Science*, 11(15): 221–228.
- [13] Jiang R, Li D, 2017, Review and Prospect of Research on Transformational Leadership in Western Schools. *Foreign Educational Research*, 44(8): 76–89.
- [14] Zhao Q, Xi R, 2018, The Transformation of Principals' Leadership: The Impact of Transformational and Transactional Leadership on Teachers' Job Satisfaction. *Educational Journal of Renmin University of China*, 2018(2): 5.
- [15] McCarley TA, Peters ML, Decman JM, 2016, Transformational Leadership Related to School Climate: A Multi-Level Analysis. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44(2): 322–342.
- [16] Manshadi MD, Ebrahimi FP, Abdi HM, 2014, A Study of the Relationship Between Transformational Leadership and Organizational Learning. *European Journal of Experimental Biology*, 4(1): 12–20.
- [17] Yukl G, 1999, An Evaluation of Conceptual Weaknesses in Transformational and Charismatic Leadership Theories. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 10(2): 285–305.
- [18] Meindl JR, Ehrlich SB, Dukerich JM, 1985, The Romance of Leadership. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30(1): 78–102.
- [19] Jiang J, 2008, An Analysis of the Role Conflict of Principals in School Transformation. *Journal of Modern Education*, 2008(6): 9–14.
- [20] Xuan Y, Zhong W, 2017, Theoretical Construction of the Management Specialization of Chinese University Presidents Based on the Improvement of Governance Ability. *Educational Research*, 38(10): 52–58.
- [21] Chai DS, Hwang SJ, Joo BK, 2017, Transformational Leadership and Organizational Commitment in Teams: The Mediating Roles of Shared Vision and Team-Goal Commitment. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 30(2): 137–158.
- [22] Lucas SE, Valentine JW, 2002, Transformational Leadership: Principals, Leadership Teams, and School Culture, Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 1–5, 2002, New Orleans, LA.
- [23] Hartnell CA, Walumbwa FO, 2011, Transformational Leadership and Organizational Culture: Toward Integrating a Multilevel Framework, in Ashkanasy NM, Wilderom CP, Peterson MF, (eds.), *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*, Volume 2, Sage, London, 225–248.
- [24] Wang Z, Sun J, Zhao Y, 2012, Leadership Effectiveness in the Chinese Organizational Context: A Meta-Analysis of

Transformational Leadership, Leader-Subordinate Exchange, and Destructive Leadership. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 20(2): 174–190.

- [25] Robinson VM, Lloyd CA, Rowe KJ, 2008, The Impact of Leadership on Student Outcomes: An Analysis of the Differential Effects of Leadership Types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(5): 635–674.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.