

Transformational Leadership and PLCs: Preparing Teachers as Leaders for Organisational Change through Innovative Teacher Education Practices

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Abstract

This paper explores how transformational teacher leadership and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can support meaningful and lasting change in schools. It focuses on how the key traits of transformational leadership influence school culture by promoting collaboration, innovation, and professional growth. While school leadership is often associated with principals, this paper argues that teachers also play a critical role as leaders within their schools, especially when trusted and supported.

This paper is set within a South African context, where many schools continue to face the legacy of inequality, under-resourcing, and top-down structures, the paper highlights the need for leadership that is inclusive, people-centred, and responsive to local realities. PLCs are examined as practical spaces where teachers can reflect, share knowledge, and lead change through collaborative action.

Using a systematic literature review, the paper draws on recent research and national policy to show how Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes can better prepare pre-service teachers to take on leadership roles. It recommends embedding leadership development and collaborative practice into the curriculum so that future teachers are equipped to lead transformation from the start of their careers.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Teacher Leadership, Professional Learning Communities, Organisational Change, School Culture, Initial Teacher Education, South Africa

Introduction

A major element of the success of an organisation is dependent on leadership, organisational culture, and the willingness of its members to accept and enact organisational change. In schools, the organisational culture reflects the shared values, beliefs, and traditions held by its members, which influence the functioning of the school and its capacity to innovate and improve (Stolp, 1994; Engels et al., 2008). These ideas are deeply embedded and impact how school communities respond to change.

Teachers, as emerging leaders within the school system, are increasingly called upon to shape the organisational culture of schools. While school principals are traditionally recognised as formal leaders, the evolving demands of education position teachers as central figures in fostering collaboration, leading professional development, and promoting a culture of innovation and growth (Lezotte, 2001). The integration of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within school environments enables teachers to act as catalysts for change and development. In addition, Akinyemi et al. (2020) posit that positive professional relationships established through PLCs enable teachers to support one another in discussing and managing challenges.

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The South African Department of Basic Education is currently facing significant economic constraints, which directly impact the level of funding received by public schools. As a result, many school communities operate with limited physical and human resources (Plessis & Mestry, 2019). In addition, South African schools are frequently characterised by inadequate infrastructure, including overcrowded classrooms, deteriorating facilities, and insufficient teaching materials (West & Meier, 2020). These conditions place added pressure on teachers, who are increasingly expected to move beyond their traditional instructional roles to respond creatively and collaboratively to these challenges. In such environments, leadership must be distributed, and teachers must be empowered to lead school-based initiatives that improve both learning conditions and organisational culture.

Bourn (2016) argues that teachers have the power to act as agents of educational change. Beverborg et al. (2020) assert that teachers assist in fostering a shared vision, contribute to a climate of continuous professional development, and model behaviours that support a culture of teaching and learning, using social influence to motivate peers, learners, and parents toward shared goals. According to Philpott and Oates (2017), one approach that enables teachers to lead school-based change and promote professional collaboration is through the use of PLCs.

PLCs are not merely discussion forums; rather, they serve as structured platforms for action, reflection, and collective growth (Mundy, 2018). In PLCs, teachers collaborate to solve problems, share insights, and design strategies that respond to learners' needs (Linder et al., 2012; Mundy, 2018). This aligns with the principles of transformational leadership, which emphasise inspiration, motivation, and the empowerment of others.

The South African Department of Basic Education is currently facing economic constraints that affect the amount of funding received by schools. Therefore, many South African school communities lack physical and human resources (Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Furthermore, South African schools are commonly characterised by poor and inadequate infrastructure, which contributes to overcrowded classrooms (West & Meier, 2020). These contextual challenges force teachers to move beyond their traditional roles in order to overcome these issues.

As part of my own work with teacher training and mentoring in under-resourced schools, I have facilitated workshops that combined PLC-style collaboration with leadership simulation tasks. Teachers participated in reflective circles, examined school case studies, and designed actionable school improvement plans based on contextual challenges they had experienced. These experiences demonstrated that when teachers are positioned as reflective leaders, their confidence grows, and they begin to see themselves not only as implementers of policy but as agents of change who shape the direction of their schools. This practitioner-based insight reinforces the theoretical arguments that inform this paper.

Problem Statement

Research has long drawn a connection between leadership, organisational culture, and school improvement (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Lee & Louis, 2019). Lucas and Valentine (2002) highlight that a weak link in this chain often contributes to school failure. South Africa's education system continues to grapple with the historical legacy of apartheid, which left many school communities with fragmented cultures and limited capacity for transformation (Bipath & Adeyemo, 2014). These structural issues are

further compounded by the Department of Education, current economic constraints, poor and inadequate infrastructure, and overcrowded classrooms, which continue to undermine efforts to improve teaching and learning environments (Plessis & Mestry, 2019; West & Meier, 2020). To meet the country's post-democratic goals for educational reform, teachers must be empowered to assume leadership roles that drive organisational change and improve teaching and learning outcomes.

The legacy of apartheid in South Africa created an educational history that resulted in a failed organisational culture, limiting school leaders' willingness or ability to enact meaningful change. This culture continues to impact how teachers view their roles within school change processes (Bipath & Moyo, 2016). A bureaucratic and hierarchical approach to leadership, common during apartheid, failed to nurture collaborative decision-making and professional autonomy. In contrast, democratic school transformation calls for a participative, inclusive, and innovative leadership style that places teachers at the centre of change.

Teachers are regarded as knowledge creators and agents of change, facilitating educational transformation (Bourn, 2016; Supermane et al., 2018). For this reason, there is a need for teacher education programmes that embed leadership development into their curriculum to create teachers with the skills needed to engage in school-based transformation (Ferreira et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2012).

Innovative teacher education practices that embed leadership development and support for PLCs are essential for preparing teachers to act as agents of change. While many policies call for teacher leadership, there remains a disconnect between pre-service training and the realities of school transformation (Ferreira et al., 2015; McGarr et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2012). The persistent gap between theory and practice raises important questions about the responsiveness of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to the challenges of educational change, particularly in lower-income communities.

This paper responds to this challenge by situating teacher leadership within transformational leadership theory and PLCs, advocating for innovative approaches in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to foster these capacities.

Statement of Objectives

The objective of this paper is to propose how ITE programmes can be strengthened to better prepare teachers to lead organisational change through transformational leadership and PLCs. The paper aims to highlight the leadership potential of teachers beyond administrative roles and to advocate for the intentional development of leadership competencies within their ITE training. Ultimately, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on how innovative teacher education practices can produce reflective, transformational teacher leaders who are capable of shaping school culture and driving sustainable change from within.

The paper also aims to highlight the disjuncture between current ITE programmes and the leadership demands placed on new teachers, particularly in under-resourced and culturally diverse school contexts in South Africa. By analysing current scholarship and contextual challenges, the paper argues for the integration of leadership development and collaborative professional practices, like PLCs, to be incorporated within teacher education curricula.

Methodology

The methodology of this paper was informed by doing a systematic literature review, which focused on recent studies, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks related to transformational teacher leadership, PLCs and teacher education. Sources were selected based on their contribution to understanding how teacher leadership and PLCs support inclusive education, innovation, and organisational change. To ensure its relevance to current educational challenges and discourse, special attention was paid to literature published within the last five years. Furthermore, particular attention was paid to literature relevant to the South African schooling context to ensure contextual alignment. A thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns, recurring arguments, and conceptual gaps. This structured literature review forms the basis for a theoretically grounded and practice-oriented argument for enhancing ITE programmes.

Applying a Theoretical Lens

Transformational Leadership Theory

During apartheid, school leadership in South Africa functioned primarily to uphold a discriminatory curriculum and bureaucratic control. This rigid and hierarchical system was not designed to support innovation, shared decision-making, or equity. As such, it is no longer fit for purpose in a post-apartheid, democratic context. Therefore, post-democratic educational reforms have seen a shift towards transformational leadership, as it promotes teacher empowerment, collaborative decision-making, and school reform (Prasetia et al., 2020).

Transformational leadership theory centres on the capacity of leaders to inspire, motivate, and elevate others toward achieving shared goals. In a school setting, this involves fostering a culture of teaching and learning through a compelling vision that is co-constructed by staff, learners, and the broader community (Prasetia et al., 2020; Lucas & Valentine, 2002).

A transformational leader empowers staff to look beyond their own interests, encouraging them to commit to the collective mission of school improvement. According to Bass and Avolio (1993), four key traits define this leadership style. These traits are critical for building a school culture that supports sustained organisational change.

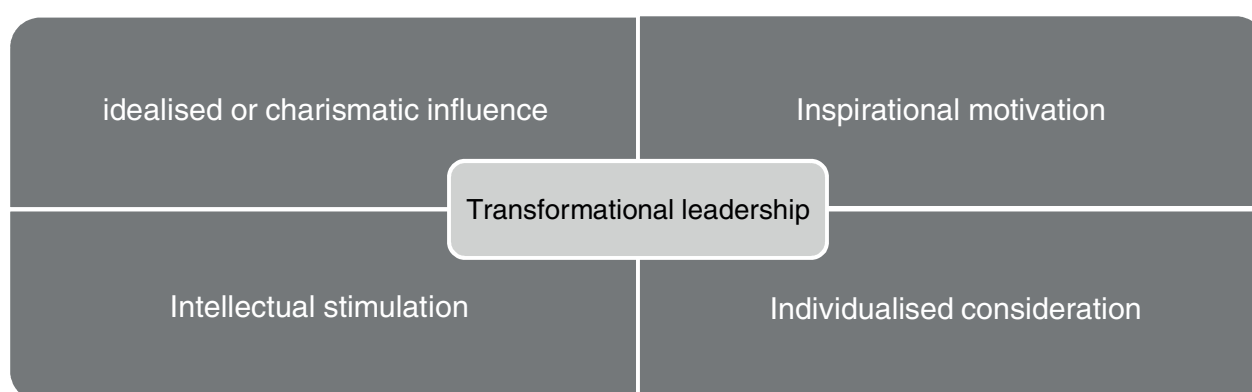


Diagram showing the 4 traits of transformational leader; adapted from Bass and Avolio (1993)

1. **Idealised Influence (II):** A teacher leader acts as a role model, demonstrating integrity, professionalism, and commitment. Their behaviour earns the trust and respect of colleagues, which in turn fosters unity and motivates others to adopt the shared vision (Lynch, 2012).
2. **Inspirational Motivation (IM):** The teacher leader communicates high expectations and articulates a compelling vision of the school's future. This motivates and energises staff, enhancing their sense of purpose and belonging (Alig-Mielcarek, 2003).
3. **Intellectual Stimulation (IS):** This trait encourages innovation and critical thinking. Teacher leaders who embrace IS promote professional autonomy, involve colleagues in problem-solving, and encourage them to challenge outdated practices (Lynch, 2012).
4. **Individualised Consideration (IC):** A transformational leader recognises the unique needs and potential of each staff member. Through mentorship, coaching, and personalised professional development opportunities, they build capacity and strengthen interpersonal relationships.

These four interconnected dimensions align with the goals of PLCs, where mutual respect, innovation, and shared leadership are core values (Huijboom et al., 2021). Teacher education programmes should therefore provide future educators with opportunities to practise these traits during training, particularly through experiential learning, reflection, and collaborative inquiry (Epstein, 2013).

The influence of transformational teacher leadership on organisational school culture

Each school possesses its own unique culture, which is shaped and maintained through leadership. According to Ngang (2011), an effective school leader promotes a culture of shared values and beliefs and encourages collaboration among staff. This is especially relevant in South Africa's education system, where schools are still navigating the transition from hierarchical, compliance-based leadership to one rooted in collaboration and shared purpose.

Scholars consistently assert that transformational leadership is one of the most effective styles for building a positive organisational culture (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Rashid et al., 2004; Alas & Vadi, 2016; Anderson, 2017). More recent research confirms this, showing that transformational leadership significantly improves teacher motivation, self-efficacy, and the organisational culture of the school, which in turn supports improved teaching and learning outcomes (Reid, 2023). Since culture is not static but constantly evolving, transformational leadership offers a framework for intentionally shaping it in positive ways.

Each of the four traits of transformational leadership plays a vital role in reshaping stagnant school cultures. This is especially important in the South African context, where issues of marginalisation and inequality continue to affect both teachers and learners (Masinire, 2015). Teachers who embody these traits can play a key role in creating more inclusive teaching and learning environments. As Donohue and Bornman (2014) explain, inclusivity in education is not just about placing learners in the same classroom. It's about building a system where all learners are able to participate meaningfully and feel a genuine sense of belonging.

II allows teacher leaders to act as role models, setting the standard for ethical behaviour and commitment to learner success. Their consistency in upholding values such as justice, transparency, and integrity builds

trust and cohesion among their peers. IM helps teacher leaders articulate a compelling shared vision. This provides direction and fosters buy-in among staff, aligning them to a common goal and purpose.

IS encourages innovation. Teachers are empowered to think critically, challenge outdated traditions, and collaboratively design strategies that better serve their learners. In many under-resourced schools, this approach sparks creativity and builds the confidence needed to experiment with new practices.

IC ensures that teachers feel seen, heard, and supported. Through acts of mentoring and peer support, teacher leaders cultivate spaces where vulnerability is not seen as a weakness but as a necessary part of growth.

According to Anderson (2017), transformational leadership works particularly well in schools because of its emphasis on influence rather than control. This aligns with the ethos of teacher leadership: leadership that is grounded in professional practice, not just formal authority. When teacher leaders use influence to disrupt entrenched norms and inspire new ones, they are engaging in cultural transformation that benefits the whole school community.

The influence of transformational teacher leadership on organisational change

For organisational change to succeed, the existing knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of school members need to be unfrozen, altered, and refrozen. Staff must be involved in the process and encouraged to envision and embrace change, abandoning previous practices in favour of collective goals that improve school effectiveness (Özgür, 2016).

The transformational leadership style is frequently cited as the most effective for facilitating organisational change (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Shrestha, 2020; Rashid, Sambasivan, and Rahman, 2004; Anderson, 2017). According to Anderson (2017), transformational teacher leaders collaborate with their peers to identify what needs to change. They create a shared vision and execute changes in partnership with others.

Unlike hierarchical leadership styles, transformational teacher leaders listen to their colleagues and build mutual trust. They foster a collaborative spirit that supports, enacts, and sustains change (Shrestha, 2020). This approach is particularly suited to the dynamic demands of 21st-century education systems. This is especially true in resource-constrained schools, where formal leadership alone is often insufficient to address the daily demands of teaching and learning and the challenges associated with working in an under-resourced context.

Transformational leaders pay attention to the developmental needs of others and promote teacher leadership, empowering their peers to learn, grow, and improve (Prasetia et al., 2020; Lee & Louis, 2019).

The Role of PLCs in Driving Organisational Change in Schools

According to Lee and Louis (2019), PLCs are valuable tools to support teacher development and lead organisational change. Schools are continuously subjected to new challenges and reforms. Principals and teacher leaders must ensure that staff members are equipped with the skills and knowledge to cope with the rapid changes brought by technological advancements, curriculum reform, and globalisation. This constant evolution in the educational landscape calls for structures that promote continuous professional growth and shared learning. According to Rayiramkandath (2017), this can only be achieved through ongoing professional development initiatives that support reflection, collaboration, and innovation.

Organisational learning structures such as PLCs provide platforms for staff members to collaborate, share knowledge, and build capacity to enact and sustain change. These communities allow teachers to work together to analyse learner performance, explore teaching strategies, and co-construct solutions that respond to their contextual challenges. PLCs promote collective responsibility and provide a safe space where educators engage in professional dialogue aimed at improving teaching and learning.

According to Lee and Louis (2019), PLCs are not simply groups for discussion but function as structured forums for initiating professional conversations, critical reflection, and collaborative decision-making. In line with this, the Department of Basic Education presents PLCs as social and collaborative learning structures that support ongoing professional development across schools (Feldman, 2020). These spaces cultivate teacher agency and empower educators to challenge traditional approaches, engage with new ideas, and co-lead school improvement initiatives. PLCs are thus positioned as powerful drivers of organisational change in schools.

Rashid, Sambasivan, and Rahman (2004) highlight the importance of reflective practice in the success of organisational change. Leaders need to create and sustain opportunities for meaningful dialogue and reflection. PLCs provide this platform, enabling principals, staff, and other educational stakeholders to network and evaluate their practices. These reflective sessions foster trust, deepen relationships, and create shared ownership of school improvement efforts.

Yusof, Osman, and Noor (2016), along with Lewis, Asberry, Dejarnett, and King (2016), assert that collaborative cultures such as those nurtured in PLCs allow teachers to improve their instructional practices through ongoing organisational learning. These communities effectively dissolve the invisible barriers of isolation that often prevent collaborative teacher growth. By bridging this gap, PLCs support the development of a strong professional culture that embraces experimentation, peer learning, and innovation.

PLCs motivate teachers to collectively improve their knowledge and skills, ultimately enhancing learner outcomes and facilitating whole-school change. However, Yusof et al. (2016) caution against using PLCs as a forced or compliance-driven form of teacher development. For PLCs to be meaningful and sustainable, teachers must buy into the benefits of collaborative learning and willingly support the programme. A culture of trust and voluntary participation is essential if PLCs are to influence school change meaningfully.

Contemporary Relevance

The issues discussed in this paper are not just theoretical, as they speak directly to the current realities faced by South African schools and their teachers. Classrooms today are made up of a diversity of learners who speak different languages, have different learning needs, and come from varied cultural and economic backgrounds. Therefore, teachers need practical ways to respond to this diversity and ensure inclusivity in their classrooms.

However, despite strong policy frameworks guiding these practices, a recent study found that many South African teachers struggle with confidence in applying inclusion strategies (Malahlela & Johnson, 2024). Transformational teacher leadership practices create space for more inclusive approaches, where teachers support one another and focus on meeting the needs of all learners, not just those who fit the system (Supermane et al., 2018).

PLCs also support long-term change by encouraging teachers to keep learning, share ideas, and work together to solve everyday challenges (de Jong et al., 2018). This kind of collaboration makes it easier to try out new teaching methods, use technology meaningfully, and move away from one-size-fits-all approaches (Hallam et al., 2015).

At the heart of this is a shift towards a more learner-focused and democratic way of schooling. It positions teachers as agents of change who actively contribute towards sustainable school development and are able to respond to the needs of their learners and communities in ways that are both innovative and sustainable.

Conclusion

Given the ongoing challenges facing many South African schools, ITE programmes must be responsive to these realities and prepare teachers as leaders as a practical response to systemic constraints. ITE programmes must go beyond technical preparation and integrate leadership development from the outset. Future teachers must be equipped with the mindset, skills, and confidence to lead change, foster a collaborative culture, and respond to the evolving needs of diverse school contexts.

Transformational teacher leadership and the strategic use of PLCs are critical tools in the pursuit of organisational change. When aligned with a supportive school culture and underpinned by thoughtful initial teacher education, they hold the potential to transform schools into inclusive, collaborative, and learner-centred spaces.

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