

Seeking the Ideal School Leader: A Qualitative Study about Greek Teachers' Point of View

Stravakou Pelagia^{1*}, Lozgka Evangelia²

¹Dr. Associate Professor, Department of Primary Education, Democritus University of Thrace Nea, Chili, Alexandroupolis

²Postdoctoral Researcher, Contract Lecturer, Department of Primary Education, Democritus University of Thrace

DOI: [10.36348/jaep.2024.v08i02.004](https://doi.org/10.36348/jaep.2024.v08i02.004)

| Received: 09.01.2024 | Accepted: 13.02.2024 | Published: 16.02.2024

*Corresponding author: Stravakou Pelagia

Dr. Associate Professor, Department of Primary Education, Democritus University of Thrace Nea, Chili, Alexandroupolis

Abstract

The voluntary and willing participation of followers is a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of the leadership phenomenon. However, followers' view about leaders and leadership is usually overlooked in research. The present study therefore aims to explore teachers' opinions about the ideal school leader and the effect of leadership in education. Data for this study were collected using free text as a research tool and qualitative content analysis as a research method. Findings reflect the leadership models that participants preferred for education, the qualifications that -in their opinion- the ideal leader possesses in a school unit, as well as the influence that they estimated that leadership has in the educational field.

Keywords: Ideal school leader, teachers, qualitative research, content analysis, written text.

Copyright © 2024 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized in the literature that school leadership is a key factor in school effectiveness (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995, p. 243) and that it plays the most decisive role in student learning after teaching (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 553). In fact, in the modern literature, educational leadership is prioritized over management, and its importance is overemphasized; while it is supported the leadership that is exercised based on moral values, which focuses on inspiration and the formation of a vision for the organization, which leads to the transformation of the organization, etc.; even though the appearance of such types of leadership become impossible in the modern educational reality that is shaped by policies of a neoliberal nature, which have led to increased accountability and centralization of educational systems, with the result that the work of school principals has been limited to the exercise of administration and an artificial leadership (Lobascher, 2016, pp. 2-8). The literature also shows that the research interest is often focused on the opinions of school leaders themselves about the effectiveness of their leadership, while something similar does not happen for the opinions of other members of the school community, and especially teachers, on the same issue (Harris, Day, & Hadfield, 2003, pp. 67-68; Herrera, 2010, p. 39), although the active participation of follower-educators is

a prerequisite for leadership to exist (Firestone & Louis, 1999, p. 316).

The above rationale was the starting point of the present research, the aim of which is to explore the opinions of teachers/followers about the ideal leader in education. This study was also conducted to extend the findings of our prior study (see Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018).

The remaining part of the paper proceeds as follows: First, the clarification of the term "leadership" is attempted, and, then, the most well-known and widely used leadership models in the literature are briefly presented, as they will serve the needs of the research to integrate the findings of the present research into the existing theory and research discussion in the literature (Donley, Detrich, States, & Keyworth, 2020, pp. 1-3).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Conceptual Clarification of Leadership

Definitions of leadership abound in the literature. There seem to be almost as many as the scholars who tried to define it (Yukl, 2013, p. 2). Especially school leadership has been extensively researched for many decades, without a consensus on

what exactly it constitutes, which is of course justified by its complexity (Leithwood & Duke, 1999, pp. 45-46).

According to Yukl (2013), "Most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization" (p. 2). Other authors (e.g. Bourantas, 2001, p. 310) have also pointed out that the purpose and aim of exercising this influence is the willing and voluntary cooperation of followers for specific goals to be met. Also, Bush and Glover (2014, pp. 554-555) highlight the three dimensions of leadership that derive from the above definition:

- the vision, which in the mainstream educational leadership literature is usually defined either as the future and attractive image envisioned for the school by its leader or as the measurable and clear goals that are set and guide the members of the organization during the process of a change (Ylimaki, 2006, pp. 621-623). But for the vision to matter, it needs to be accepted as a collective commitment by the members of the organization, who will be called upon to implement it as well as to facilitate its implementation by functional structures (Bell & Harrison, 1995, n.p.).
- influence: Bush and Glover (2014, p. 554) observe that both individuals and groups can exert influence, that there is an intention for its exercise, which is the achievement of specific goals, and that its exercise does not presuppose the possession of formal authority and therefore can be exercised by anyone in the organization and not only by its head, as is the case in management.
- and values, which show an inseparable relationship with leadership since leaders are expected to behave on the basis of their professional and personal values (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 555), which was also confirmed by the previous research that we have conducted (see Stravakou, Lozgka, & Melissopoulos, 2018, pp. 156-157).

The Models/Types of Educational Leadership

Several models or types of leadership can be found in the literature, each proposing a different way of exercising leadership (leadership behavior and practices), as well as the characteristics and abilities that the ideal and effective leader in education should have (Donley *et al.*, 2020, p. 1; Leithwood, 2005, p. 1, 7). The most well-known and widely recognized typology is that of Leithwood and Duke (1999), which was later enriched by other authors (Raptis & Vitsilaki, 2007, p. 35).

The models of this typology, together with those added later and frequently mentioned in the literature, are listed below, as they will be used for the needs of the research.

Managerial Leadership

In this model, leadership is equated with the exercise of specific managerial functions (Bush, 2007, p. 395). According to Leithwood and Duke (1999), this specific type of leadership has a focus on the "functions, tasks, or behaviors of the leader and assumes that if these functions are carried out competently the work of others in the organization will be facilitated" (p. 53).

The power to exert influence is obtained by the leader from the formal authority he/she holds, and this is proportional to his/her position in the management hierarchy (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 556). In this context, the formal leader/head of the organization holds a dominant position in policy-making or decision-making in the organization (Raptis & Vitsilaki, 2007, p. 39).

Instructional Leadership

This model, unlike the rest, emphasizes the effect and direction of leadership, which is the improvement and development of learning through teachers, and not the leadership process of influencing (Bush, 2007, p. 401; Bush & Glover, 2014, pp. 556). Here the role of leadership is to facilitate, assist, and support learning and teaching (Brolung, 2016, p. 42), and the focus of the leader's interest is the behavior of teachers as they contribute directly, through the activities they develop, in student development (Leithwood & Duke, 1999, p. 47). This type of leadership includes practices, such as mentoring and coaching, continuing professional development, curriculum management, etc. (Kaparou & Bush, 2016, pp. 4-5).

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership, which is considered identical to management, concerns a social exchange between a leader and his/her followers, where the former provides the latter with resources or benefits after knowing their needs, so that they exchange the execution of the work, their behavior, and their performance with the satisfaction of their needs by the leader (Lozgka, 2021, p. 87; Raptis & Vitsilaki, 2007, p. 66). In this context, the teachers of a school unit contribute to school effectiveness to obtain key rewards that a principal has due to his/her power (Bush, 2006, p. 12). On the other hand, the leader deals more with the goals and structures of the organization than with the people in it, while he/she focuses on data and processes related to decision-making and defines goals that can be achieved (Raptis & Vitsilaki, 2007, p. 66).

Transformational Leadership

The transformational leader's interest is focused on increasing the commitment and dedication of his/her followers to the goals pursued by the organization, leading to followers' greater productivity and effort (Bush & Glover, 2003, pp. 12-15). Transformational leadership, which is intertwined with change and vision (Raptis & Vitsilaki, 2007, pp. 67-68), includes the following dimensions for school organizations: goal

setting, vision building, providing personalized support, shaping a productive culture, providing intellectual stimulation, demonstrating high-performance expectations, developing incentives for participation in decision-making structures, and providing a role model regarding important organizational values and good practices (Leithwood & Duke, 1999, p. 49).

Ethical Leadership

This model argues that leaders operate with integrity, and their leadership is guided by their personal and professional, or spiritual values. Thus, the decision-making, goal-setting, and vision-setting of the organization are based on the moral values of the leader. The focus of leadership is the moral code, beliefs, and values of leaders, while ethical propositions about what is good and right direct the process of influence and power (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 559; Leithwood & Duke, 1999, p. 50).

Distributed leadership/teacher leadership

Unlike individual leadership, where the leader's ability to influence is based on his or her formal position in the management hierarchy, in this model, the power to exert influence is distributed by the formal leader in the organization, and leadership results from being exercised by groups or networks of individuals because of the expertise they possess, which (expertise) they share (Bush & Glover, 2014, pp. 559-561). This model also includes participative leadership, which concerns collective decision-making in the organization (Bush & Glover, 2003, pp. 17-18).

Contingent Leadership

This specific type of leadership maintains that leadership behavior should be adapted each time to the unique circumstances that characterize each educational organization. Thus, the effective leader needs to constantly examine the situation prevailing in the organization and adopt the appropriate leadership behavior (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 564).

Postmodern Leadership

Postmodern leadership constitutes a new model, for the definition and clarification of which there is no unanimity. According to it, there is no objective reality, only subjective experiences and interpretations of events by the members of the organization, which this model emphasizes. The only guideline it offers for the exercise of leadership is the recognition of the importance of the

individual, as well as the attention and respect that the leader should show to the different points of view of those involved in the organization (Bush & Glover, 2003, pp. 20 -21).

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in the winter semester of the academic year 2023-2024. The research sample consisted of 45 postgraduate students, who were both future and practicing teachers and attended a postgraduate program provided by the Department of Primary Education of Democritus University of Thrace regarding educational management and leadership.

The spontaneous production of a written text was the tool of the research, as it allows the spontaneous opinions of the participants to surface without any researcher's influence (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018, p. 113). In particular, the participants were asked during a teaching hour to write a free text, outlining the ideal - according to them - leader in education.

Qualitative content analysis was chosen as the research method, which allows for a condensed and systematic presentation of the importance of the research material (Schreier, 2012, pp. 1-9). This specific method, which is considered to be of a hybrid methodological nature, serves both the qualitative and interpretive analysis of the research data through the placement of the participants' reports in (sub)categories on the basis of strict rules and a systematic process, as well as the analysis of the emerged frequencies of sub(categories) (Mayring, 2014, p. 10). To explore the ideal -according to the participants- school leader's leadership models, the subcategories were derived from the theory that exists in the literature (deductively) and these constituted the leadership models presented earlier. In contrast, the other two categories, concerning the qualities of the ideal leader and the areas where the influence of leadership is found as well as their subcategories, emerged directly from the research material (inductively) (Schreier, 2012, pp. 80-106).

FINDINGS

Quantitative analysis

From the quantitative analysis of the research material, a total of 680 references emerged, which are divided into three main categories as follows:

Table 1: The main categories and overall references that emerged from the analysis

a/a	Categories	Number of references	Percentage%
1.	The models-types of leadership	394	57.94%
2.	The qualities of the ideal school leader	193	28.38%
3.	The areas of leadership influence	93	13.68%
Total		680	100%

As shown in Table 1., the research participants mainly referred in their texts to the ideal school leader's leadership models, they wrote much less about the

qualifications the ideal school leader has to possess, and only to a small extent did they indicate the areas where

they have identified the influence of the leadership phenomenon.

What is interesting about the findings in Table 2. is that the participants considered the ideal school leader to be one who practices transformational

leadership (this model gathered almost more the half of the total references in this category) and only to a small extent does the ideal school leader adopt managerial leadership and, surprisingly, even less ethical, distributive, and instructional leadership:

Table 2. The participants' references about leadership models

a/a	The models of leadership	Number of references	Percentage%
1.	Managerial leadership	74	18.78%
2.	Instructional leadership	31	7.87%
3.	Transactional leadership	4	1.02%
4.	Transformational leadership	176	44.67%
5.	Moral leadership	56	14.21%
6.	Distributed/teacher leadership	36	9.14%
7.	Contingent leadership	9	2.28%
8.	Postmodern leadership	8	2.03%
Total		394	100%

The dispersion of the participants' opinions regarding the qualities of the ideal leader is also impressive, which can perhaps be justified by the subjectivity that characterizes the definition of leadership (Yukl, 2013, p. 7). However, the personal characteristics that the ideal school leader needs to possess came first in preference, followed by his/her ability to cooperate with all those involved directly or indirectly with the school unit, his/her strong moral values and his/her acting based

on them, but also by his/her emotional intelligence and especially his/her empathy. The participants did not fail to emphasize, however, to a much lesser extent, the needed training of the ideal school leader, pointing out that it is necessary for him/her to have a dense knowledge base not only about the issues of the organization, administration, and leadership of education but also about the education sciences:

Table 3. The participants' references about the ideal school leader's qualities

a/a	The qualities of the ideal school leader	Number of references	Percentage%
1.	Ability to cooperate	38	19.69%
2.	Emotional intelligence	24	12.44%
3.	Training	22	11.40%
4.	Communication skills	18	9.33%
5.	Personal characteristics	66	34.19%
6.	Moral values	25	12.95%
Total		193	100%

Finally, concerning the areas identified by the participants in the research that the ideal leader influences through the exercise of his/her leadership, these are mainly the effectiveness and orderly functioning of the school unit, the formation and

assurance of a positive school climate and an environment which favors learning and teaching, as it was also mentioned that the ideal school leader influences the cultivation of cooperative culture in the school unit:

Table 4. The participants' references about the areas that school leadership influences

a/a	The areas of leadership influence	Number of references	Percentage%
1.	School effectiveness	37	39.79%
2.	A positive school climate that cultivates learning and teaching	31	33.33%
3.	Development of a collaborative culture in the school unit	25	26.88%
Total		93	100%

The following conclusions follow from the quantitative analysis of the data:

- The ideal school leader from the teachers' perspective applies the model of transformational leadership and only to a small extent the model of managerial and ethical leadership.

- The participated teachers value and distinguish the ideal school leader mainly by his/her personal characteristics and secondarily by his/her cooperativeness.
- The future and practicing teachers see the impact of leadership on school effectiveness and the overall orderly functioning of the school

unit, as well as on the school climate and culture, which should foster teacher collaboration, teaching, and learning.

Qualitative analysis

In agreement with the modern literature and in contrast to the educational reality that confines school principals to the exercise of administration or strengthens their administrative role (e.g. with Law 4823/2021, articles 66-101), the participants in the research argued that the ideal school leader promotes his/her leadership role while also exercising management to ensure the school unit's smooth and orderly operation as well as the achievement of the planned goals (Raptis & Vitsilaki, 2007, p. 73; Stravakou, 2003, pp. 26-31).

Even though researchers have recently emphasized the importance and necessity of distributed leadership in schools (Harris *et al.*, 2003, p. 67), and the same someone would expect from the research participants, the latter preferred transformational leadership for the ideal school leader. This leadership type was also combined many times in the participants' texts with the type of moral leadership. Thus, from the participants' point of view, the ideal school leader, acting on the ethical principles and vision he/she has for the organization he/she leads, which he/she also tries to convey to the members of the school organization by serving as a role model, guides and supports teachers in their work, trying to satisfy their needs, and inspires efficiency, appetite, and realization of the vision from them. The ideal school leader forms a positive culture of strong cooperation and open communication between school members (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018, pp. 115-117), encourages the introduction of innovations and changes in the organization, and attempts to change and improve the school unit himself/herself, too. According to two participants:

"An ideal leader, for me, is the one who fairly and democratically inspires his/her team members to give their best towards a common goal and vision" (Participant 27)

"The ideal leader has moral values and is a role model" (Participant 18)

What also stands out in the findings is the considerable number of the participants' references about the personal characteristics of the ideal school leader in terms of his/her qualifications, a view that refers to the traditional leadership theory of characteristics (trait theory) (Lozgka, 2021, p. 84). In this context, comments were made about *"the courage and the will"* (Participant 40) that he/she should demonstrate and the *"self-confidence that he/she should exude"* (Participant 38), as well as about his/her determination, which makes him/her in the eyes of his/her colleagues effective. When the ideal school leader has the above characteristics in parallel with emotional intelligence, which allows him/her to understand others and to put himself/herself in the position of his/her colleagues, and his/her ability

to work with all those involved in the operation of the school unit; the participated followers are willing to follow their leader in achieving the vision and expected goals (Gómez-Leal, Holzer, Bradley, Fernández-Berrocal, & Patti, 2021, p. 1; Stravakou, 2003, pp. 27-30).

Finally, the participants' opinions regarding the areas that leadership influences are in agreement with school principals' views in previous research and with the contemporary literature in general (Harris *et al.*, 2003, p. 67; Stravakou *et al.*, 2018, pp. 155-157), highlighting the catalytic effect that a school principal/leader has as a driving force for the development of the school unit and showing the importance of professional learning for him/her to adequately cope with his/her work (Mathibe, 2007, pp. 537-538; Stravakou, 2003, p. 30).

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations of this study, which are its non-generalizable sample and the selection of specific leadership models from the literature for their exploration; findings demonstrated that the use and exercise of formal authority on the part of school leaders as well as the exhaustion of the rights that the educational legislation provides to them do not ensure the voluntary and willing cooperation of their fellow teachers/followers in the achievement of educational goals and objectives. On the contrary, for the latter to happen, the findings show that school leaders need to advance their leadership role while placing particular emphasis on the human factor within the organization as well as on its inspiration, motivation, and guidance. They also should strive for the formation of a collaborative culture; which favors change, improvement, and innovation.

REFERENCES

- Ballou, D., & Podgursky, M. (1995). What makes a good principal? How teachers assess the performance of principals. *Economics of Education Review*, 14(3), 243-252.
- Bell, J., & Harrison, B. T. (2018). Finding a Practical Theory for Managing Education: Why Vision? Whose Values?. In *Vision and Values in Managing Education* (pp. 2-7). Routledge.
- Bourantas, D. (2001). *Manatzment: Theoritiko ypovathro, synchrones praktikes* [Management: Theoretical background, modern practices]. Athina: Ekdoseis G. Benou.
- Brolund, L. (2016). Student success through instructional leadership. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 8(2). Retrieved November 12, 2023, from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230490.pdf>
- Bush, T. (2006). *Theories of educational management*. Retrieved November 12, 2023, from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1066693.pdf>

- Bush, T. (2007). Educational leadership and management: Theory, policy, and practice. *South African Journal of Education*, 27(3), 391-406.
- Bush, T., & Glover, D. (2003). *School Leadership: Concepts and Evidence: A Review of Literature Carried out for National College for School Leadership*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.
- Bush, T., & Glover, D. (2014). School leadership models: What do we know?. *School Leadership & Management*, 34(5), 553-571. doi:10.1080/13632434.2014.928680
- Donley, J., Detrich, R., States, J., & Keyworth, (2020). *Leadership Models*. Oakland, CA: The Wing Institute. <https://www.winginstitute.org/quality-leadership-leadership-models>
- Firestone, W. A., & Louis, K. S. (1999). Schools as cultures. In J. Murphy & K. S. Louis (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration: A Project of the American Educational Research Association* (2nd ed.) (pp. 297-322). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gómez-Leal, R., Holzer, A. A., Bradley, C., Fernández-Berrocal, P., & Patti, J. (2022). The relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership in school leaders: a systematic review. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 52(1), 1-21. doi: 10.1080/0305764X.2021.1927987
- Harris, A., Day, C., & Hadfield, M. (2003). Teachers' perspectives on effective school leadership. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 9(1), 67-77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354060032000049913>
- Herrera, R. (2010). *Principal leadership and school effectiveness: Perspectives from principals and teachers* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Western Michigan University. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/568>
- Kaparou, M., & Bush, T. (2016). Instructional leadership in Greek and English outstanding schools. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(6), 894-912. doi: 10.1108/IJEM-03-2015-0025
- Law 4823/2021, FEK A' 136/3-8-2021, «Anavathmisi tou scholeiou, endynamosi ton ekpaideftikon kai alles diataxeis» [School improvement, teachers' empowerment and other arrangements].
- Leithwood, K. (2005). *Educational leadership prepared for the Laboratory for Student Success*. The Laboratory for Student Success. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED508502.pdf>
- Leithwood, K., & Duke, D. L. (1999). A century's quest to understand school leadership. In J. Murphy & K. S. Louis (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration: A Project of the American Educational Research Association* (2nd ed.) (pp. 45-72). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lobascher, S. (2016). *Leadership or management in schools?: A critical review of the literature*. Retrieved January 11, 2023 from https://www.theibsc.org/uploaded/IBSC/Conference_and_workshops/2016/workshops/3.Lobascher-S_Supplement.pdf
- Lozgka, E. Ch. (2021). *I dioikisi ton anotaton ekpaideftikon idrymaton mesa apo to paradeigma ton Prytanikon Archon: Apopseis Prytaneon kai Antiprytaneon* [University management through the paradigm of the Rectorial team: Rectors' and Vice-rectors' opinions]. Thessaloniki: Ekdotikos Oikos Adelfon Kyriakidi.
- Mathibe, I. (2007). The professional development of school principals. *South African Journal of Education*, 27(3), 523-540.
- Mayring, P. (2014). *Qualitative content analysis: Theoretical foundation, basic procedures and software solution*. Klagenfurt. Retrieved from <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/39517>
- Raptis, N., & Vitsilaki, Ch. (2007). *Igesia kai dioikisi ekpaideftikon monadon: I taftotita tou diefthynti tis protovathmias ekpaidefsis* [Leadership and management of educational organizations: The primary school principal's identity]. Thessaloniki: Ekdotikos Oikos Adelfon Kyriakidi.
- Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. London: Sage.
- Stravakou, P. A. (2003). *O diefthyntis tis scholikas monadas protovathmias kai defterovathmias ekpaidefsis: Theoritiki analysi kai empeiriki dierevnisi* [The principal of primary and secondary education: Theoretical analysis and empirical exploration]. Thessaloniki: Ekdotikos Oikos Adelfon Kyriakidi.
- Stravakou, P. A., & Lozgka, E. Ch. (2018). School principals as leaders: Pre-service and in-service teachers' perspective. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(3), 109-117. doi: 10.18844/prosoc.v5i3.3916
- Stravakou, P. A., Lozgka, E. Ch., & Melissopoulos, S. (2018). The influence of values on educational administration: The school principals' perspective. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 6(4), 147-160. Retrieved from <https://www.ijem.com/journal/2018/April-2018/12.pdf>
- Ylimaki, R. M. (2006). Toward a new conceptualization of vision in the work of educational leaders: Cases of the visionary archetype. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(4), 620-651. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X06290642>
- Yukl, G. (2013). *Leadership in organizations* (8th ed.). Boston: Pearson.