



LEAD - An Example of Good Practice for Developing Educational Leadership Competencies Through Transformative Learning

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Abstract. This paper explores the role of transformative learning in the development and consolidation of educational leadership competencies, within the specific context of training school principals and members of school administrative boards involved in the national LEAD project in Romania.

Continuous professional development for school leaders, when designed around participants’ specific needs and grounded in collegial collaboration—such as mentoring, shared experiences, and reflective practice—is widely recognized as an effective approach with positive effects on both individual growth and organizational culture.

The study is theoretically grounded in Transformative Learning Theory (Jack Mezirow), as well as in perspectives on collaborative professional development and contemporary leadership theories (e.g., Peter Senge). It is situated within the broader context of Romania’s dynamic and sustainability-oriented society.

The research aims to analyze the impact of a training program tailored to adult learners in leadership roles, emphasizing experience-based learning in line with transformative learning principles. An action research design was employed over a six-month period (October 2025–March 2026), guided by the question: How can school principals be prepared for the school of the future? Data were collected through observation, interviews, and questionnaires.

Findings suggest that training approaches based on case study analysis and structured debates, which encourage the exchange of ideas and experiences, enhance participants’ satisfaction and contribute to the development of leadership competencies. The study highlights the value of transformative, collaborative learning environments in fostering effective educational leadership.

Keywords: Transformative Learning, Educational Leadership, School Leaders.

1 Introduction

The training of transformational leaders represents a real challenge for the education system, as change in schools depends on the transformative changes of principals in

their role as leaders. Orientation toward a sustainable future cannot be analyzed separately from the school, since schools shape the citizens of tomorrow, equipping them with the competencies needed to adapt to a changing world.

A number of recent studies highlight the impact of school principals on the development of school culture (Fullan, 2005): “We need, instead, leaders who can create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and the teaching profession itself.”

There is also research demonstrating that investment in principal training is an efficient investment (Grissom, 2021).

Although the impact of leadership styles has been demonstrated by numerous classical and contemporary studies, the concrete ways in which such leaders are trained are far less frequently addressed. Even though there is a significant national concern regarding the training of educational leaders—evidenced by recent updates to the Education Law requiring mentoring-based training for principals in their first mandate (Pre-University Education Law no. 198/2023, art. 194(7)), as well as the proposal of a professional profile for school managers—there is still a lack of clearly defined methods for their development.

Starting from these theoretical premises and the practical need for solutions to train transformational leaders for a sustainable school, an action research study was conducted over a six-month period (October 2025–March 2026), guided by the question: How can school principals be trained for the school of the future?

What strategies have the strongest formative impact on the development of competencies and on fostering lasting changes in the attitudes and mindsets of school leaders?

2 Literature review

The training of transformational leaders has become a major concern in the current context of redefining education under the impact of profound social changes. “Further support is needed to develop school leaders as strong pedagogical leaders” (OECD, 2025a, p. 16).

The focus on developing transformational leaders is not accidental; on the contrary, it reflects a broader paradigm shift in society and, consequently, in education.

In a context where new generations bring about “a new type of diversity” in the workplace, overlapping with other forms of diversity, where the labor market is becoming increasingly dynamic, and where artificial intelligence is becoming a common presence in our lives, the role of the school is being fundamentally reconsidered. In this setting, leadership capable of engaging individuals in meaningful changes in attitudes and behaviors, and of acting in a responsible, prosocial, and future-oriented manner, is no longer merely an aspiration—it is a genuine necessity.

Transformational leadership is widely understood as a process through which leaders inspire and engage followers to achieve higher levels of motivation, performance, and moral development, while also fostering meaningful organizational change. It emphasizes the creation of a strong relational connection between leaders and followers, enabling individuals to exceed their initial expectations and contribute to a shared vision

(James MacGregor Burns, 1978; Bernard M. Bass, 1985). This leadership approach involves motivating individuals to go beyond self-interest for the benefit of the group, encouraging innovation, and building commitment to organizational goals (Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio, 1994; Gary Yukl, 2013). Furthermore, it highlights the mutual development of both leaders and followers, where the interaction elevates values, aspirations, and overall effectiveness (Peter G. Northouse, 2019). Together, these perspectives present transformational leadership as a dynamic and influential process that drives both individual growth and organizational success.

Transformative leadership is a leadership approach that seeks to create deep, meaningful change within individuals, organizations, or society by inspiring and empowering others to realize their full potential. It focuses on transformation rather than mere management — changing values, beliefs, and behaviors to achieve a shared vision for improvement.

Key aspects include:

- vision and inspiration: Leaders articulate a compelling vision that motivates others.
- empowerment: They encourage creativity, autonomy, and personal growth among followers.
- ethical and moral purpose: Transformative leaders often act from strong principles and aim for positive social impact.
- change orientation: They drive cultural, structural, or systemic change, not just operational success.

In education and social contexts, it's often distinguished from transactional leadership (which focuses on rewards and compliance) by its emphasis on long-term transformation rather than short-term performance.

In the context of current social realities, the Romanian school system is making sustained efforts to develop a legislative framework aimed at fostering a new type of leader. Evidence of this can be found in the Pre-University Education Law no. 198/2023, which outlines several directions regarding mentoring for principals in their first year of mandate.

Furthermore, the professional profile of the school manager (Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, 2026) represents another important step toward developing professional leaders capable of generating change.

For example, this profile includes the following general competencies:

- Educational leadership, institutional governance, and strategic orientation
- Administrative and financial operational management and compliance
- Quality management and internal evaluation
- Curriculum management, management of teaching, learning and assessment processes, and teachers' professional development
- Communication, relationships, partnerships, and community collaboration

Each general competency is associated with specific competencies and behavioral descriptors. In adult education, one of the strategies with lasting effects is the approach described by Jack Mezirow.

Mezirow defines transformative learning as "the process by which we transform problematic reference frameworks (mentalities, mental habits, perspectives on meanings) - sets of assumptions and expectations - to make them more comprehensive, lighter, more reflexive and more capable of affective change" (Mezirow, 2014, p. 168).

Transformative learning theory originates in Jack Mezirow's work in adult and continuing education, where it gained prominence in the 1990s. Mezirow argued that transformative learning depends on engaging in dialogue with others and critically examining the assumptions underlying our values and beliefs.

Transformative leadership plays a central role in cultivating reflective learners by creating environments that encourage critical inquiry, dialogue, and continuous self-evaluation. Such leaders support individuals in questioning underlying assumptions and engaging with diverse perspectives, which are essential processes for deep, transformative learning. This approach aligns with the view that learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but a reflective process through which individuals reinterpret their experiences and construct new meanings (Jack Mezirow, 1991; David A. Kolb, 1984). Contemporary research further emphasizes that transformative leaders foster psychological safety and collaborative learning spaces, enabling reflective learners to engage more openly in critical thinking and self-development (Shields, 2010; Brooks, 2017; Ramos, 2025; Sebastien, 2017). Through this process, learners become more autonomous, adaptable, and socially aware, demonstrating the capacity to apply reflective insights to complex real-world challenges. Ultimately, transformative leadership and reflective learning are interconnected processes that promote both individual transformation and collective growth within educational and organizational contexts. It is important to underline that all contemporary learning theories focus on experience (both cognitive and affective) and the power of learning to change us. The changes occur as learning outcomes are produced by positive affective relations.

In USA, New Leaders propose TLF Transformational Leadership Framework. The Framework is organized to show how specific school leader actions have influenced and enabled schoolwide practices that have collectively yielded sustained improvements in student achievement. How is the Transformational Leadership Framework Structured? Categories, Levers, and Actions The TLF centers around five categories that effective schools focus on to achieve sustained school improvement: Learning and Teaching, School Culture, Talent Management, Planning and Operations, Personal Leadership and any of these are detailed in TLF (New Leaders, 2024, p. 3).

Transformational leadership is widely regarded as essential for the sustainability and effectiveness of contemporary educational institutions, particularly in contexts characterized by rapid change and the need for innovative solutions. By adopting a transformational approach, leaders are able to motivate and empower teachers, improve student achievement, and cultivate a collaborative and supportive school culture. Nevertheless, the application of this leadership style presents certain challenges, such as resistance to change and limited organizational resources, which may hinder its full implementation. Despite these constraints, transformational leadership offers substantial opportunities for growth by promoting adaptability, continuous improvement, and a forward-looking mindset that aligns institutional objectives with the evolving needs of the educational community. In this regard, as schools respond to the complex demands

of the twenty-first century, transformational leadership stands out as a key driver of innovation and long-term organizational success.

3 Methodology

We opted to conduct an action research study, in the sense defined by John W. Creswell (2014), because action research offers a means for staff development, for teachers' development as professionals, and for addressing schoolwide problems (Allen & Calhoun, 1998)

In the perspective of John W. Creswell, action research is a systematic and reflective methodology through which practitioners investigate their own practices in order to bring about meaningful improvement in real-world contexts. It involves an iterative cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, allowing for continuous refinement of interventions based on emerging evidence (Creswell, 2014). Recent scholarship highlights that action research not only generates practical solutions but also supports professional development and fosters collaborative, inquiry-based cultures within organizations (Ernest T. Stringer, 2014; Jean McNiff, 2017). Furthermore, it emphasizes the integration of critical reflection into decision-making processes, enabling practitioners to adapt strategies to the specific needs of their contexts and participants (Anne Burns, 2010). In this way, action research serves as a powerful approach for driving innovation and sustainable change, bridging the gap between knowledge generation and practical transformation.

Participants

The participants were a total of 50 principals and member of school administration board enrolled in the teacher training programme. The 50 participants, all holding teaching positions as their primary role, attended the training course in two cohorts, organized into groups of 25 members each. The composition of the participant group was as follows: 39 women and 11 men; 28 school principals (15 principals and 13 deputy principals) and 22 members of the Boards of Administration of educational institutions in Braşov County; 21 participants from rural schools and 29 from urban schools. In terms of professional experience in their current role, 6 participants had between 1–5 years of experience, 23 had 6–10 years, 11 had 11–15 years, and 10 had over 15 years of experience.

Research method and instrument

The research method used is the survey, and the instrument used is the questionnaire. The questionnaire items are organized using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 – to a very small extent, respectively 5 – to a very small extent

The completion was voluntary and anonymous. The express consent of the participants was obtained before completing the questionnaire under the supervision of the researcher.

The action research study was conducted within a leadership competencies training course carried out between October 2025 and March 2026. The sessions were designed

based on Jack Mezirow’s theory, in the form of interactive workshops that enabled participants to share experiences, reflect on those experiences, and engage in both small and larger group interactions to solve common problems.

The topics addressed during the training activities focused on current issues inspired by the school reality faced by principals and members of Boards of Administration—such as generational change leading to communication challenges with colleagues, parents, and even students; digitalization and attitudes toward artificial intelligence; and recent changes in education and their impact on school staff.

Additionally, various case studies were explored, addressing dilemmas encountered in everyday school life.

4 Analysis/Results interpretation

The quantitative analysis of the satisfaction questionnaire highlighted that the training program was highly appreciated by participants, both in terms of its content and the methods/strategies employed, as illustrated in the graphs presented and interpreted below:

The distribution of responses indicates a strong positive perception of the course novelty, with the majority of participants selecting the highest rating (5), followed by a considerable number selecting 4. Very few respondents chose moderate ratings, and none selected low values, suggesting that the course was widely perceived as highly innovative and relevant (Figure 1).

Most participants rated the course novelty highly, with the majority giving 5 stars.

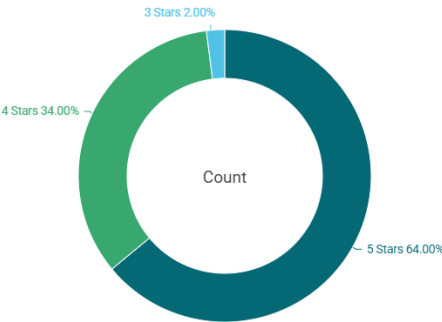


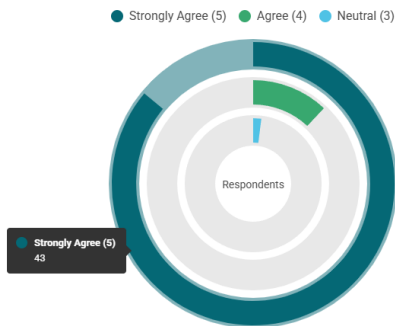
Fig. 1. Course Novelty Feedback

The four modules completed within the training programme Educational Leadership for Excellence in School Management were: Module I – Situational Leadership; Module II – Institutional Management; Module III – Financial Management, including the management of projects funded through external/European funds; and Module IV – Human Resource Management and the creation of a positive school environment. The

distribution of responses indicates an overwhelmingly positive perception of the usefulness of these modules, with the vast majority of participants assigning the highest rating, while only a small proportion selected slightly lower values and negligible responses reflected moderate or low usefulness. Overall, these findings suggest that the modules were perceived as highly relevant and effective, contributing significantly to participants' professional development and supporting the acquisition of essential competencies in educational leadership.

The distribution of responses indicates an overwhelmingly positive perception of the usefulness of the modules. The vast majority of participants (approximately 88%) selected the highest rating (5), while a small proportion (around 10%) chose 4, and only a negligible percentage selected lower values. The near absence of low ratings suggests that respondents consistently perceived the modules as highly valuable and effective. Overall, the results reflect a strong level of satisfaction and highlight the relevance and practical applicability of the modules within the educational context (Figure 2).

The content addressed was relevant to professional teaching or management.



Source: Professional Development Feedback Survey (N=50)

Fig. 2. The relevance of the training course content

The survey item examined participants' perceptions regarding the extent to which the course content was relevant to their professional activity (teaching/managerial) (Figure 3). The distribution of responses indicates a highly positive perception of the relevance of the course content to participants' professional activities. The vast majority of respondents (43) selected the highest rating (5), while a smaller number chose 4 (6 responses), and only one respondent indicated a moderate level (3). No responses were recorded for the lowest ratings (1 or 2). These findings suggest that the course content was widely perceived as highly relevant and applicable to both teaching and managerial practice, reinforcing its effectiveness in supporting professional development (Figure 4).

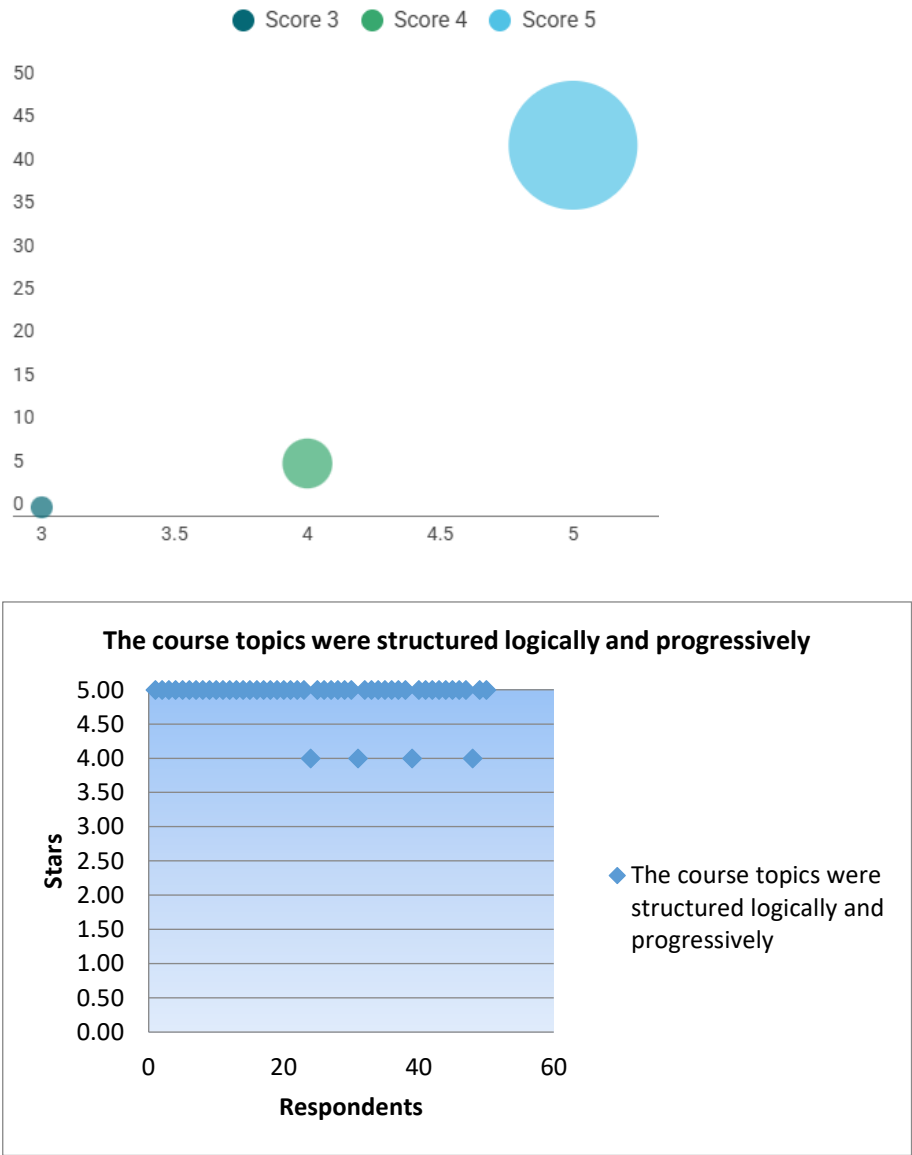


Fig. 3. The course structure

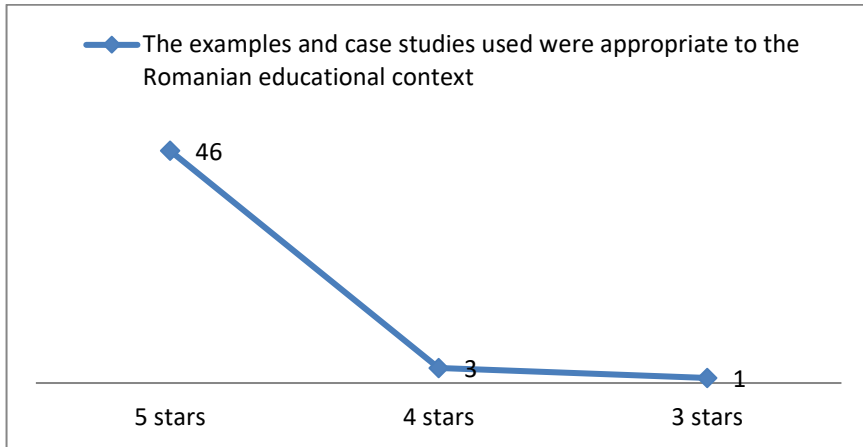


Fig. 4. The participants' perception of the usefulness of case studies

The open-ended survey item invited participants to identify three key strengths of the course. A thematic analysis of the responses revealed several dominant categories. The most frequently mentioned strength was the practical applicability of the course, including the use of case studies, real-life examples, and opportunities to apply knowledge in professional contexts. This was followed by interactivity and collaboration, highlighting the importance of teamwork, dialogue, and the exchange of professional experiences. Participants also emphasized the expertise and professionalism of the trainers as a major strength, alongside the clear structure and organization of the course. Additionally, respondents noted the relevance and usefulness of the content for their professional activity, as well as the positive and collaborative learning atmosphere. Overall, the findings indicate that the course was perceived as highly practice-oriented, interactive, and professionally valuable (Figure 5 and Figure 6).

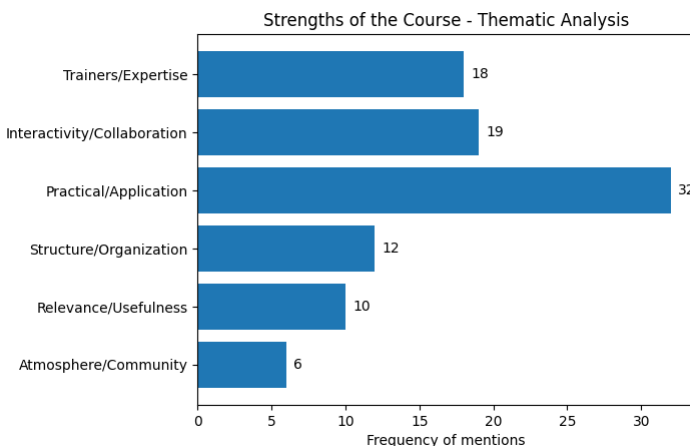


Fig. 5. The Strengths of Training- Thematic Analysis

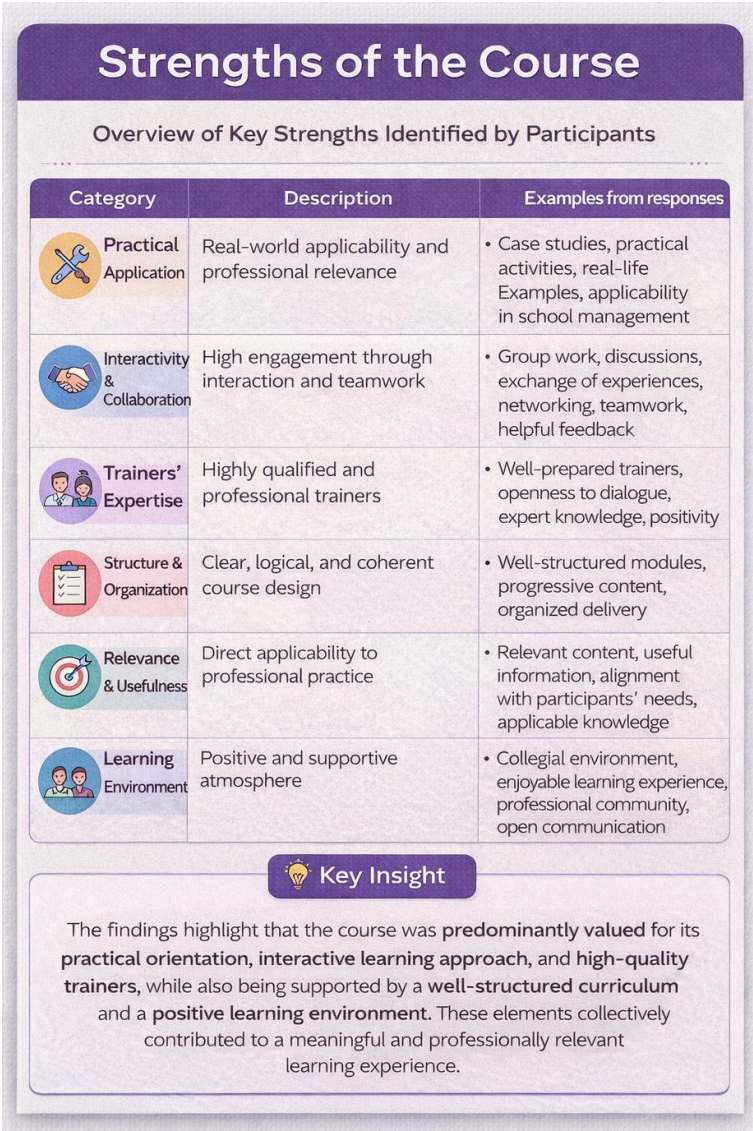


Fig. 6. The Strengths of Training

The open-ended responses of the questionnaire, subjected to content analysis, highlighted the idea that case studies, structured debates, and shared reflections are the most appropriate approaches for developing leadership competencies.

Although the present research also has limitations related to the specifics of action research, it remains an example of good practice for training leaders for a changing school.

5 Conclusions

Based on the actions undertaken and the analysis conducted, it can be argued that, for the development of leadership competencies aligned with the competency profile required by a changing school, a training program grounded in transformative learning theory represents a possible answer to the question: How can we train leaders for the school of tomorrow? The program implemented on the basis of Jack Mezirow's theory, in which reflection, sharing, and dialogue were central elements, facilitated changes in attitudes and the development of partnerships among leaders from different schools. The development of transformative leaders is supported by engagement with key areas such as ethical education, transformational learning, creativity, inquiry and innovation, as well as both quantitative and qualitative research methods, alongside the capacity to lead organizational change. Within educational contexts, effective leaders must possess the knowledge and judgment to create environments in which teachers can identify and apply the most appropriate instructional strategies for diverse learners, demonstrating not only what actions are required, but also how and when to implement them. Although leadership challenges may vary across primary, middle, and secondary education levels, existing literature suggests that these differences do not significantly affect the core practices that enhance student learning outcomes. Consequently, educational leaders should cultivate a set of essential behaviors that signal effectiveness, including fostering a strong sense of community, minimizing distractions that hinder teaching and learning, maintaining a visible and engaged presence, and establishing clear and consistent communication with all stakeholders. Ultimately, effective educational leadership is characterized by flexibility, ethical awareness, and a transformative orientation, enabling leaders to adapt their approaches in response to evolving organizational demands.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process: During the preparation of this work the authors AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript used. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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