

Beacons in the mist: How transformative educational leadership can rewrite the destiny of Romanian rural schools

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Abstract

Transformative educational leadership is an emerging model with great potential for revitalizing schools in rural areas, where the education system frequently faces major challenges: poor infrastructure, limited financial and human resources, low levels of community involvement and high levels of social vulnerability among students. In this context, school leadership assumes an essential role not only administratively, but also as an inspirational catalyst for change and sustainable development. The present study aims to investigate the features and practices of transformative educational leadership, emphasizing its capacity to positively influence organizational culture, school performance and the degree of involvement of educational stakeholders. The key dimensions of this type of leadership - strategic vision, critical thinking, risk-taking, valuing collaboration and supporting teaching innovation - and how they are adapted to the specificities of rural communities are analyzed. The paper integrates a series of relevant case studies from Romanian rural schools, where principals, project coordinators or teacher leaders have managed to implement significant change through participatory, empathetic and inclusive leadership. Finally, recommendations are made on the development of transformative leadership skills through continuous training, professional mentoring and strengthening school-community partnerships in order to support equitable and quality education for all students, regardless of their background.

Keywords:

leadership, transformation, rural education, inclusion, innovation

1. Introduction

In recent decades, leadership has become a central concept in educational research, being recognized as a key determinant in the success and transformation of school organizations (Leithwood et al., 2006). Particularly in rural schools, effective leadership can play a decisive role in overcoming systemic obstacles and facilitating a process of sustainable institutional development. The rural educational environment in Romania continues to face significant challenges: lack of resources, teacher migration, poor infrastructure and low parental involvement (Miroiu & Varly, 2014; Păun, 2017). In this context, the transformative leadership model (Bass & Avolio, 1994) emerges as an appropriate approach to foster organizational transformation, leveraging existing human resources and cultivating an institutional climate based on trust, cooperation and pedagogical innovation. Transformative leaders not only manage effectively, but also inspire and motivate the school community, being oriented towards systemic change and promoting inclusion (Shields, 2010). In Romania, recent studies highlight the need to adapt educational leadership to rural specificities, emphasizing the importance of continuous training and development of

leadership skills among school principals (Țiclău, 2020). Rural education has significant formative potential, but remains vulnerable in the absence of locally adapted leadership. In this respect, this study investigates the dimensions and impact of transformative educational leadership in Romanian rural schools, with the aim of identifying models of good practice and highlighting the conditions necessary to generate real innovation in rural education. In this approach, we aim to analyze the paradigm shifts on how knowledge of transformative leadership theory generates and transmits through the educational system, especially in the context of the extension of new media. In this paper, we aim to analyze the paradigm shifts on how knowledge of transformational leadership theory generates and transmits through the educational system, especially in the context of the extension of new media. The paper also proposes an integrated approach to the concept of educational leadership, articulating elements from organizational theory, sociology of education and change management. It emphasizes the tension between bureaucratic administrative leadership and transformative, creative, equity and participation-



oriented leadership. Leading schools in vulnerable environments requires not only managerial skills, but also a deep understanding of community needs, socio-economic and cultural diversity, and a real capacity to construct a shared educational vision. In this respect, the analysis is based on recent studies and concrete interventions in Romanian rural schools, demonstrating how educational leaders can act as agents of transformation and as promoters of an inclusive school climate, open to innovation and long-term learning. We openly plead for a responsible, didactic, deontological and cultural assumption of the new landmarks, highlighting the hypostases, functionalities, facilities of the new managerial theories, but also difficulties, limits or current and future challenges. The new anthropological reality imposes new types of behaviors, centered on the formation of basic competences, of identification and operation with the current knowledge or paradigm. And, above all, it obliges us to adopt a responsible attitude, with a view to preserving and enhancing the spiritualization and humanization of the world in which we live. In this new anthropological reality, it becomes essential to form educational conducts centered on the development of basic competences in the field of transformative leadership, with an emphasis on inspiration, vision and the cultivation of values, which calls for a deeply responsible approach - one that not only preserves but also enhances the spiritual and humanistic dimensions of the contemporary world.

2. Transformative Educational Leadership: Conceptual Distinctions and Theoretical Foundations

Transformative educational leadership (TEL) emerges as a critically engaged, values-driven framework that distinctly diverges from traditional leadership paradigms such as transactional, instructional, or even transformational leadership. Rooted in a commitment to equity, inclusion, and social justice, TEL is not merely concerned with enhancing institutional performance but seeks to fundamentally reimagine educational structures and relationships through a deeply ethical and emancipatory lens (Shields, 2010; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). Unlike transformational leadership, which, although inspiring, often emphasizes organizational efficiency, charisma, and vision alignment without directly confronting systemic inequities (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005), transformative leadership is inherently normative and political. It critiques

dominant ideologies, questions oppressive institutional logics, and mobilizes leadership as a tool for deep structural change (Shields, 2013). While transformational leadership is typically enacted within existing frameworks to increase engagement and performance, transformative leadership seeks to alter those very frameworks when they perpetuate marginalization or injustice. In contrast to transactional leadership, which operates on a logic of compliance and reward, TEL emphasizes moral purpose and ethical responsibility, moving beyond mere managerialism to engage with the lived realities of all stakeholders, especially those historically excluded from decision-making processes (Burns, 1978; Fullan, 2003). Furthermore, TEL integrates insights from critical theory, postcolonial thought, and emancipatory pedagogies, creating a dynamic model that is responsive to both global inequities and local socio-cultural particularities (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016). Central to TEL are several interconnected principles that position leadership as a catalyst for justice and transformation. These include: the pursuit of deep and systemic equity, the reconstruction of knowledge paradigms that sustain educational exclusion, the redistribution of power in school governance, and the active promotion of interdependence and global consciousness (Shields, 2018; Boske, 2014). Leaders operating within this model are expected to engage in reflective praxis, foster democratic participation, and embody moral courage in resisting normalized injustices within schooling systems. Moreover, TEL's theoretical architecture is aligned with critical pedagogical practices, emphasizing dialogue, relational trust, and collective action (Freire, 1970/2005). It encourages leaders to facilitate spaces for critical inquiry, participatory deliberation, and culturally responsive engagement. In doing so, it creates the conditions not only for academic success but also for human flourishing and civic renewal. A significant contribution of TEL to educational leadership theory lies in its dual orientation: it attends simultaneously to individual transformation and institutional reconfiguration. This positions it as a compelling model for rural education contexts, where systemic neglect, cultural erasure, and social vulnerability often coalesce (OECD, 2020; Miroiu & Varly, 2014). By emphasizing localized leadership that is relational, inclusive, and context-aware, TEL offers a powerful framework for navigating the complexities of rural schooling in Romania and beyond. Therefore, this study adopts transformative educational leadership not as a prescriptive technique but as a philosophical

stance and ethical imperative—one that urges educational leaders to act with integrity, disrupt injustice, and co-create educational ecosystems that serve the common good (Shields, 2010; Khalifa et al., 2016). This orientation is especially urgent in contemporary educational landscapes marked by polarization, inequality, and the erosion of democratic norms.

Educational leadership is an essential component in analyzing the functioning and development of educational institutions. According to Bush (2008), educational leadership involves influencing organizational activities to achieve educational goals. This influence manifests itself in different ways, depending on the social, cultural and institutional context in which the educational act takes place.

In the literature, several models of educational leadership have emerged, such as transactional, distributional, instructional or transformative (Leithwood et al., 2006; Day & Sammons, 2014). In the Romanian context, marked by multiple disparities between urban and rural areas, the transformative model is becoming increasingly relevant, as it proposes a leadership based on values, vision and systemic change (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Shields, 2010).

In vulnerable educational settings, leaders must act not only as managers, but also as agents of transformation and community cohesion, with the capacity to cultivate a climate of trust, equity and collective commitment (Theoharis, 2007; Fullan, 2001). In addition, effective leadership is closely linked to the capacity to continuously learn, adapt to context and use local resources strategically (Sergiovanni, 2001; Harris & Lambert, 2003).

2.1. The Eight Core Principles of Transformative Educational Leadership

At the heart of transformative educational leadership lies a constellation of eight interrelated principles that articulate the values, intentions, and practices necessary for enacting leadership that transcends managerial or performative goals. These principles collectively define a moral and intellectual compass for educational leaders committed to equity, justice, and systemic transformation (Shields, 2010; 2018). Each of these principles reinforces the notion that education is not a neutral endeavor but one embedded in social, cultural, and political dynamics.

- A Mandate for Deep and Equitable Change

Transformative leadership demands a radical rethinking of educational purposes and practices. It challenges the superficial implementation of reforms that leave structures of inequity intact, calling instead for deep, systemic, and sustained change. This principle rejects technocratic solutions and urges leaders to address the root causes of educational failure, such as poverty, systemic racism, gender bias, or cultural exclusion (Shields, 2013; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). In rural Romanian contexts, this implies not only improving infrastructure but confronting the low expectations often held for marginalized students and communities.

- Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Knowledge Frameworks

This principle emphasizes the need to critically examine and reframe dominant knowledge paradigms that have historically excluded or misrepresented certain groups. Leaders are called to deconstruct curricula and pedagogical models that reflect monocultural or Eurocentric assumptions and to reconstruct them in ways that are inclusive, pluralistic, and culturally responsive (Khalifa et al., 2016). It recognizes knowledge as socially constructed and invites dialogical spaces where multiple epistemologies can coexist. This is especially vital in multilingual or multicultural rural settings where local knowledge systems are often delegitimized.

- Addressing the Inequitable Distribution of Power

Transformative leadership actively contests the asymmetrical distribution of power within schools and systems. It promotes shared governance, voice, and participation from all educational stakeholders, including students, families, and marginalized communities (Shields, 2010; Dantley & Tillman, 2006). Power is reconceptualized not as control, but as relational and generative, oriented toward capacity building and democratic engagement. In Romanian rural schools, this may involve including parents and community elders in decision-making processes and recognizing the experiential authority of underrepresented voices.

- Balancing Private and Public Good Education under TEL is envisioned not merely as a vehicle for personal advancement, but as a public good that contributes to the flourishing of society at large. This dual emphasis encourages leaders to foster both individual achievement and collective responsibility. It recognizes that civic education, ethical formation, and community cohesion are as vital as standardized outcomes (Fullan, 2003; Shields, 2018). In rural areas,

this principle reinforces the idea that schools can be vital hubs for revitalizing social capital and sustaining local democratic life.

- Commitment to Emancipation, Democracy, Equity, and Justice

At its core, transformative leadership is ethical and political, aspiring toward the liberation of those oppressed or marginalized by dominant structures. It embodies an unwavering commitment to equity, human dignity, and inclusive democracy. Leaders are called not only to recognize injustice, but to interrupt and transform it through courageous, morally informed action (Freire, 2005; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). This means building school cultures where all students, regardless of background, can thrive and be affirmed in their identities.

- Recognition of Interdependence and Global Awareness

Transformative leadership acknowledges that local realities are inextricably linked to global processes. It cultivates a global mindset that fosters solidarity, empathy, and ethical responsibility beyond national or cultural boundaries (Shields, 2013). In rural education, this principle inspires pedagogical practices that connect local heritage to global issues, empowering students to see themselves as global citizens while rooted in their communities.

- Balancing Critique with Hope

While TEL is deeply critical of inequitable systems, it is equally animated by hope, imagination, and the possibility of change. This principle warns against falling into despair or cynicism and emphasizes the need for constructive visioning and future-oriented action (hooks, 2003; Shields, 2018). It is a call to balance resistance with resilience, critique with creativity, and structural analysis with pedagogical innovation. In rural settings marked by chronic underinvestment, this hopeful orientation is crucial for sustaining leadership vitality.

- Exercising Moral Courage

Perhaps the most personal and challenging principle, moral courage involves the willingness to act ethically in the face of opposition, risk, or uncertainty. It means standing up for justice even when doing so is unpopular or costly (Shields, 2010; Dantley & Tillman, 2006). For rural school leaders, this may entail resisting deficit narratives, advocating for resources, or confronting exclusionary policies that marginalize Roma, disabled, or impoverished

students. It positions leadership as a moral vocation, not simply an administrative role.

Integrative Perspective

These eight principles are not isolated but interdependent; they form a coherent theoretical ecology in which leadership becomes an instrument of ethical transformation. Together, they construct a vision of education that is humanizing, participatory, and oriented towards the flourishing of both individuals and communities. In the Romanian rural context, applying these principles means recognizing both the vulnerabilities and the potentials of the local transforming not only schools, but the socio-cultural landscapes they inhabit.

2.2. *Transformative leadership: foundations, dimensions and educational relevance*

The concept of transformative leadership, developed by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass & Avolio (1994), involves a relationship of influence that goes beyond the transactional exchange of rewards and is based on inspiration, shared ideals and personal development. Transformational leaders foster collective involvement and create the conditions for innovation and self-actualization within organizations (Bass, 1998). This model integrates four main dimensions: Idealized influence - the leader acts as a role model and inspires respect and trust.

Inspirational motivation - provides a coherent and mobilizing vision.

Intellectual stimulation - challenges teachers to think critically and creatively.

Individualized consideration - responds to the individual development needs of team members (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

In education, this model is considered effective especially in challenging contexts, where there is a need to profoundly change organizational practices, encourage collaboration and promote equity (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Shields, 2010). Recent research from Romania (Țiclău, 2020; Miroiu, 2012) suggests that in rural schools, transformational leadership can make a decisive contribution to institutional revitalization, reducing dropout and stimulating community involvement.

A key aspect in applying this model in rural settings is the capacity of leaders to respond to local needs through a contextualized approach that takes into account the social, economic and cultural specificity of the community. In this regard, the

literature emphasizes the importance of continuous training of school principals in adaptive and transformational leadership (OECD, 2020; European Commission, 2018).

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research aims and objectives

The present research aims to explore and critically analyze the influence of transformative educational leadership in rural schools from Gorj county, with a particular focus on its capacity to foster organizational resilience, inclusive practices, and pedagogical innovation in contexts marked by socio-economic vulnerability. The study seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which school leadership contributes to reshaping educational trajectories in disadvantaged rural environments, while also identifying both the enablers and structural barriers that affect the implementation of transformative change.

The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

- To investigate the defining characteristics and strategic orientations of educational leadership in rural schools, with emphasis on leadership styles, decision-making processes, and the capacity for institutional vision and mission alignment in low-resource settings.
- To assess the impact of leadership practices on inclusive education, school-community engagement, and the promotion of pedagogical innovation, particularly in relation to marginalized student populations and teachers' professional agency.
- To formulate evidence-based recommendations and action frameworks, grounded in field-identified best practices, that can inform policymaking and support leadership development programs adapted to the specific challenges of rural educational systems.

3.2. Research design

The research is qualitative, with a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2014), centered on a sample of eight rural schools in Gorj county. The case study method was considered the most appropriate given the need to explore, in depth and contextually, the leadership dynamics and organizational transformations specific to educational institutions operating in vulnerable rural environments. By focusing on multiple cases, the study allows for a comparative perspective that reveals both patterns of convergence and significant divergences between institutional practices, thus increasing the external

validity and analytical richness of the findings (Stake, 2006; Merriam, 2009). The schools were selected through a purposive sampling strategy to reflect the typological and geographic diversity of the rural education system in Gorj. The inclusion criteria were based on several key indicators: (1) academic performance metrics over the past three years; (2) student retention and dropout rates; (3) degree of participation in externally funded educational programs (such as PNRAS, Erasmus+, ROSE, or school-SME partnerships); (4) socio-economic indicators of the surrounding community (based on INS and local administrative data); and (5) organizational openness to educational innovation, as reflected in institutional self-assessment reports and development strategies.

The selected schools fall into the following typologies:

- Two schools with consistently high academic achievement and active teacher-led innovation programs, functioning as informal pedagogical nuclei in their micro-regions.
- Two schools identified as having a high risk of student dropout and low transition rates to upper-secondary education, located in communities facing severe socio-economic deprivation and demographic decline.
- Two schools that have implemented European-funded educational projects in the last five years, showing an increased capacity for institutional development and cross-sectoral collaboration.
- Two schools situated in isolated or economically marginalized areas, characterized by limited access to basic services and reduced community support, but whose leadership has shown resilience and commitment to inclusive education. The territorial distribution of these units covers both hilly and sub-Carpathian zones, reflecting the heterogeneity of rural Gorj in terms of geography, infrastructure, and population mobility. This diversity allows for a nuanced investigation of how transformative leadership is exercised and contextualized across different rural realities. Moreover, to avoid selection bias and ensure representativeness, the initial school list was validated through consultation with county school inspectors and NGO representatives active in educational projects at the local level. The selection also took into account the willingness of the school leadership and staff to participate in an extended qualitative research process, involving interviews, observations, and access to institutional documents.

3.3. Participants

The study involved a total of 56 participants, selected purposefully to reflect a multi-perspective understanding of educational leadership practices in rural contexts. The composition of the sample ensured representation from key stakeholder groups within each school community:

- 8 school principals – one from each of the selected rural schools, offering insights into leadership practices, institutional strategies, and change management processes.

- 24 teachers – three educators from each school, representing various teaching levels and disciplines, selected for their involvement in school development initiatives or pedagogical innovation.

- 8 members of school boards – engaged in strategic decision-making and governance, offering an institutional and community-linked perspective on leadership and accountability.

- 16 parents – actively involved in parent committees or school projects, selected based on their direct participation in school life and their ability to reflect community engagement and parental-school collaboration.

This heterogeneous sampling approach was designed to capture the complexity of leadership dynamics across multiple levels—managerial, pedagogical, institutional, and community-based—within the rural education ecosystem of Gorj county.

3.4. Data collection methods and tools

In order to obtain a comprehensive and credible picture, a triangulated methodology was used, consisting of the following methods:

- Semi-structured interviews: conducted with principals and teachers, addressing dimensions such as educational vision, leadership style, relationship with the community and barriers to innovation.

- Focus groups: with parents and teachers in four of the selected schools to capture the dynamics of community relations and perceptions of leadership.

- Participatory observation: conducted in three units, focusing on organizational climate, inclusion initiatives and classroom atmosphere.

- Document analysis: institutional development plans, annual internal evaluation reports, managerial self-evaluation sheets and action plans to combat dropout were analyzed.

3.5. Data analysis methods

The analytical process followed five steps:

- Transcription and processing of the raw data.
- Thematic coding by identifying emergent categories.

- Comparison of codes between the analyzed units and their validation by the axial coding method.

- Triangulation of data from multiple sources to ensure inter-subjective validity.

- NVivo 14 software was used to segment and analyze the qualitative content.

4. Results

4.1. Emerging themes from the data

- Based on the coding and interpretation of the data, four central themes relevant to the analysis of transformative educational leadership in rural schools in Gorj were identified:

- Strategic vision and inclusiveness orientation - effective leaders formulate and communicate a clear direction focused on equitable access to education.

- Contextualized pedagogical innovation - use of modern educational resources and alternative teaching approaches according to local needs.

- Family and community partnership - active involvement of local stakeholders in school life.

- Continuous professional development - support for teacher training and the creation of an institutional learning climate.

Table 1

The degree of manifestation of the themes in the 8 schools analyzed

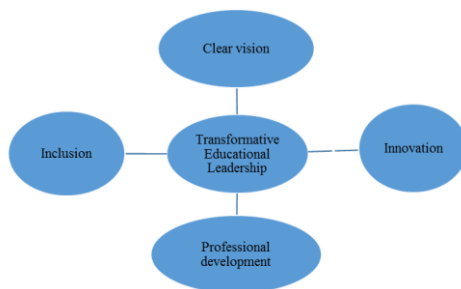
The schools (anonymized)	Education al vision	Pedagogic al innovatio n	Communit y involveme nt	Professiona l developme nt
School 1	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
School 2	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
School 3	✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓
School 4	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
School 5	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓
School 6	✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
School 7	✓	✓✓	✓	✓
School 8	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓

Legend: ✓ = present; ✓✓ = moderately developed; ✓✓✓ = advanced development.

The conceptual model illustrates the core dimensions that define and sustain transformative educational leadership (TEL) in the context of rural schools in Gorj County. At the center of the model lies Transformative Educational Leadership, which is both the guiding philosophy and the operational framework for change. This central element is interconnected with four key components—Clear Vision, Inclusion, Innovation, and Professional Development—each exerting mutual influence and shaping the overall leadership approach.

Figure 1

Conceptual model of transformative leadership in rural schools



Clear Vision — the rural educational context of Gorj, establishing a clear and shared vision is critical. Many schools operate under conditions of socio-economic hardship, demographic decline, or institutional inertia. A clear vision provides direction and coherence, enabling school leaders to align staff, students, and community efforts toward long-term goals focused on equity, excellence, and sustainability. This vision acts as a moral compass and serves to counteract fragmented or outdated practices.

Inclusion — transformative leadership in Gorj's rural areas must prioritize the inclusion of marginalized students—particularly Roma children, students with special educational needs, and those from economically disadvantaged families. Inclusive practices foster a sense of belonging, reduce dropout rates, and enhance academic engagement. TEL encourages leaders to challenge exclusionary norms and structures, actively working to dismantle barriers to participation and opportunity.

Innovation — despite limited resources, rural schools in Gorj can benefit significantly from innovative teaching strategies, digital tools, and community-based initiatives. Transformative leaders are expected to cultivate a culture of experimentation and creativity that transcends traditional pedagogical models. Innovation in this setting involves contextual

responsiveness—adapting methods to local needs and turning constraints into opportunities.

Professional Development — teacher development is essential to sustaining TEL. In Gorj's rural schools, educators often face professional isolation, limited access to training, and outdated methodologies. A transformative leader invests in continuous professional development, promoting reflective practice, collaboration, and pedagogical renewal. This focus not only enhances teacher efficacy but also fosters a professional climate conducive to change.

Dynamic Interdependence — these four dimensions are not isolated; rather, they dynamically reinforce one another. A clear vision catalyzes innovation, as it encourages risk-taking and forward-thinking. Inclusion becomes more effective when grounded in professional development that equips teachers with culturally responsive strategies. Likewise, innovation is sustainable only when embedded in a collaborative culture nurtured by ongoing training and reflective leadership. The model underscores that transformative educational leadership in Gorj county must be holistic, values-driven, and context-sensitive. It calls for leaders who not only manage institutions but also reshape them ethically and inclusively, empowering both teachers and learners in environments that have long been underserved.

5. Discussions

The findings reinforce the hypothesis that transformative educational leadership plays a decisive role in enhancing school performance, fostering inclusive cultures, and deepening the connection between educational institutions and their communities in rural areas.

The data are consistent with the theoretical contributions of:

Bass & Avolio (1994) – who argue that transformative leaders mobilize organizational energy by articulating a compelling vision and fostering trust.

Shields (2010) – who emphasizes the ethical dimension of leadership and the necessity of creating socially just and community-responsive schools.

Leithwood & Riehl (2003) – who highlight the capacity of leadership to promote innovation even in contexts marked by structural constraints.

A salient pattern across high-performing schools was the principal's role not merely as an administrator,

but as a catalyst for change—inspiring staff, engaging families, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. In these schools, leadership encouraged experimentation, shared accountability, and distributed forms of authority.

Conversely, the challenges frequently reported include:

Administrative overload – bureaucratic demands restrict time and energy available for pedagogical leadership.

Insufficient support networks – a lack of structured platforms for rural leaders to share experiences or access specialized expertise.

Human resource instability – difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified staff due to geographic isolation, poor infrastructure, or limited career development opportunities.

These findings underscore the urgent need for systemic support structures that recognize and amplify the efforts of rural educational leaders committed to transformation. Such support could take the form of leadership coaching, policy flexibility, dedicated innovation funds, and regional professional learning communities.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm that transformative educational leadership represents not only a viable but a necessary model for addressing the systemic inequities and contextual limitations faced by schools in rural education settings. In the educational ecosystems analyzed, leadership transcended its traditional administrative scope and was redefined as a vector of transformation, capable of catalyzing innovation, inclusion, and institutional resilience even under conditions of limited resources.

By integrating case studies from eight rural schools in Gorj county, the research highlighted how school leaders who articulate a strategic vision, cultivate critical thinking, and promote collaborative and empathetic cultures significantly contribute to the revitalization of school life. In particular, the capacity to support pedagogical innovation, foster school-community partnerships, and prioritize inclusive practices emerged as essential dimensions of effective transformative leadership.

The multi-level analysis revealed a clear correlation between the presence of transformative leadership traits and improvements in organizational climate, stakeholder engagement, and adaptability to

contextual challenges. Conversely, the lack of systemic support, bureaucratic overload, and human resource instability continue to hinder the sustainability of leadership-driven change initiatives in rural contexts.

This study contributes to the literature by affirming that transformative leadership is not an abstract ideal but a context-sensitive and actionable model, capable of being adapted to the particularities of rural schools. The empirical evidence suggests that transformation occurs when leadership is distributed, reflective, and participatory—when it empowers not only teachers but also students, parents, and community actors.

In light of the above, we conclude that the consolidation of transformative educational leadership in rural Romania requires:

- systematic investment in continuous professional development programs focused on leadership for equity and innovation;
- the establishment of mentoring and peer-learning networks to support reflective leadership practices;
- policy reforms that reduce bureaucratic burdens and encourage locally relevant innovation;
- the strengthening of school-community partnerships to mobilize external resources and increase educational accountability.

Ultimately, ensuring quality and inclusive education for all students, irrespective of their socio-economic background, depends significantly on the capacity of schools to embrace leadership that is not only strategic but also deeply human-centered and transformation-oriented.

Authors note:

Ionela Florentina Hortopan, pre-university education teacher currently pursuing a master's degree in the field of Educational Sciences. My academic and professional journey has fueled my passion for educational research, with a particular focus on educational leadership, school innovation, and systemic development. Throughout my studies, I have actively participated in university-level scientific communication conferences, where I have presented research papers that were recognized and awarded first place. This blend of practical teaching experience and academic training allows me to approach educational challenges from both theoretical and applied perspectives. My research interests lie primarily in

exploring transformative leadership in education, effective management strategies, and ways to foster equity and inclusion within schools. I am committed to contributing to the advancement of educational practices and policies that support the continuous improvement and revitalization of the education system.

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