



Empowering Education: The Impact of Democratic School Leadership on Educational Outcome

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Abstract:

This integrative literature review examines the role of democratic school leadership in enhancing educational outcomes. Findings reveal that democratic leadership fosters a supportive learning environment, positively impacting student achievement, teacher job satisfaction, and retention. By involving stakeholders in decision-making processes, democratic leaders promote collaboration, trust, and inclusivity, contributing to a positive school climate. Despite its benefits, challenges such as resistance to change and power dynamics exist. Addressing these barriers requires sustained efforts to build capacity and foster a culture of collaboration. Overall, the study underscores the importance of democratic leadership in creating better schools, emphasizing the need for further research and policy initiatives to support its implementation.

Keywords: democratic school leadership, participatory governance, educational outcomes, student achievement

Introduction:

The leadership style within educational institutions plays a pivotal role in shaping the overall school environment, student outcomes, and the satisfaction levels of both students and staff. Over the years, there has been a shift in educational paradigms towards more participatory and democratic approaches to school leadership. This shift is grounded in the belief that democratic leadership fosters collaboration, shared decision-making, and a sense of ownership among stakeholders, thereby promoting a more inclusive and empowering educational environment (Gronn, 2008).

Democratic school leadership emphasizes the distribution of power and authority among various stakeholders including teachers, students, parents, and community members. This approach stands in contrast to traditional hierarchical models where decision-making is centralized and top-down. Proponents of democratic leadership argue that by involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process, schools can better address the diverse needs of their communities and promote a culture of accountability and transparency (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008).

Moreover, research suggests that democratic school leadership correlates positively with several key indicators of school effectiveness, including student achievement, teacher job satisfaction, and school climate (Leithwood et al., 1999). For instance, a study by Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) found that schools with more participatory leadership structures tend to have higher levels of student achievement, as measured by standardized test scores.



Despite the growing interest in democratic school leadership, there remains a need for further empirical research to better understand its impact on school improvement efforts. This study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by examining the relationship between democratic leadership practices and various outcomes related to school effectiveness, including academic achievement, teacher retention, and school climate. By employing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how democratic leadership can contribute to creating better schools for all stakeholders.

The role of leadership in educational settings cannot be overstated, and the adoption of democratic leadership principles holds promise for fostering positive change within schools. Through this study, we aim to shed light on the potential benefits of democratic school leadership and provide insights that can inform policy and practice aimed at creating more inclusive and effective educational environments.

Literature Review:

The literature surrounding democratic school leadership is rich and diverse, reflecting the increasing interest in participatory approaches to educational governance and management. This comprehensive review aims to synthesize key findings from various studies exploring the concept of democratic leadership in schools. By examining research spanning several decades, this review seeks to provide insights into the theoretical underpinnings, empirical evidence, and practical implications of democratic school leadership.

At the heart of democratic school leadership lies the principle of shared decision-making and distributed authority (Gronn, 2008). Scholars have drawn upon democratic theory to conceptualize leadership models that emphasize collaboration, inclusivity, and accountability. According to Dewey (2016), democracy in education entails active participation of all stakeholders in shaping the educational process, with an emphasis on fostering critical thinking, autonomy, and social responsibility among students. Similarly, Freire (2020) advocates for a participatory pedagogy that empowers students to engage in dialogue, reflection, and action, thereby challenging traditional power dynamics in education.

Building upon these theoretical frameworks, researchers have developed models of democratic school leadership that prioritize collaboration among teachers, students, parents, and community members (Leithwood & Mascal, 2008). Such models often involve shared decision-making structures, such as school councils or leadership teams, where stakeholders have a voice in setting goals, allocating resources, and evaluating outcomes. By distributing leadership responsibilities across multiple actors, democratic school leadership aims to promote collective efficacy and enhance the overall effectiveness of schools (Leithwood et al., 1999).

Empirical Evidence on Democratic School Leadership

Numerous empirical studies have examined the impact of democratic leadership practices on various indicators of school effectiveness. One consistent finding is the positive association between democratic leadership and student achievement. Leithwood et al. (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of over 27,000 schools and found that schools with more participatory leadership structures tend to have higher levels of student learning, as measured by standardized test scores. Similarly, a longitudinal study by Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) found that schools with transformational leaders who fostered collaboration and shared decision-making experienced greater improvements in student achievement over time.

In addition to academic outcomes, democratic school leadership has been linked to positive effects on teacher job satisfaction and retention. Research suggests that when teachers feel valued and empowered to contribute to decision-making processes, they are more likely to be satisfied with their work and committed to staying in the profession (Louis et al., 2010). Furthermore, democratic leadership can enhance the overall school climate by promoting trust, respect, and inclusivity among stakeholders (Gronn, 2008). Schools with a strong sense of community and shared purpose are better equipped to address challenges and implement innovative practices (Leithwood & Mascal, 2008).

Despite the potential benefits of democratic school leadership, implementing and sustaining such practices pose significant challenges. One common obstacle is resistance to change among stakeholders accustomed to traditional hierarchical structures (Smylie & Hart, 1999). School leaders must navigate complex power dynamics and overcome inertia to foster a culture of collaboration and shared decision-making. Moreover, ensuring equitable participation among diverse stakeholders requires intentional efforts to address issues of privilege, voice, and representation (Sykes, et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of democratic leadership depends on contextual factors such as school size, demographics, and organizational culture (Leithwood & Mascal, 2008). What works in one setting may not necessarily translate to another, highlighting the importance of tailoring leadership practices to local needs and



realities. Additionally, sustaining democratic processes over time requires ongoing support, capacity-building, and continuous improvement efforts (Gronn, 2008).

The literature on democratic school leadership underscores the importance of fostering collaboration, inclusivity, and accountability in educational settings. Drawing upon theoretical insights from democratic theory and empirical evidence from research studies, it is evident that participatory leadership practices can contribute to positive outcomes for students, teachers, and schools as a whole. However, realizing the full potential of democratic leadership requires addressing challenges related to resistance to change, equity, and sustainability. Moving forward, further research and concerted efforts are needed to promote and support democratic school leadership as a means of creating better schools for all stakeholders.

Methodology:

For this study, an integrative literature review methodology was employed to synthesize existing research findings on democratic school leadership. The integrative literature review approach involves systematically collecting, analyzing, and interpreting literature from various sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of a particular topic (Torraco, 2005).

The initial step involved conducting a systematic search of electronic databases, including academic journals, books, and grey literature, using relevant keywords such as "democratic leadership," "school leadership," and "participatory governance." The search was conducted across multiple databases, including PubMed, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar, to ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature.

Articles were included in the review if they met the following criteria: (1) focused on democratic leadership in educational settings, (2) included empirical research or theoretical discussions related to the topic, (3) published in peer-reviewed journals or reputable academic sources, and (4) written in English. Studies that did not meet these criteria or were not relevant to the research questions were excluded from the review.

The selected articles were reviewed and analyzed to identify key themes, theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, and findings related to democratic school leadership. Data extraction involved systematically summarizing the main findings, methodologies used, and implications of each study. The analysis was guided by the research questions and objectives of the study, which aimed to explore the impact of democratic leadership on various aspects of school effectiveness.

The synthesized findings were organized thematically to identify patterns, trends, and gaps in the literature. Themes related to the theoretical foundations of democratic leadership, empirical evidence on its impact, practical implications, and challenges were identified and analyzed. The synthesis process involved comparing and contrasting findings across studies to develop a nuanced understanding of the topic. To ensure the rigor and validity of the review, a quality assessment of the included studies was conducted using established criteria such as methodological rigor, theoretical coherence, and relevance to the research questions (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Studies were critically appraised based on their research design, sampling methods, data analysis techniques, and interpretations of findings.

Findings and Discussion:

Positive Impact on Student Achievement:

Democratic leadership within schools has been consistently associated with enhanced student achievement. Empirical evidence from studies underscores the correlation between participatory governance structures and academic success. Leithwood et al. (1999) conducted a seminal meta-analysis, which revealed that schools adopting democratic leadership models tend to cultivate a supportive learning atmosphere. This environment is characterized by open communication channels, collaborative decision-making processes, and a shared sense of purpose among stakeholders. Such conducive conditions are instrumental in nurturing positive teacher-student relationships, which have been shown to be essential for academic progress (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). When students perceive their teachers as approachable and supportive, they are more likely to actively engage in learning activities and seek academic assistance when needed (Pianta et al., 2007).

Furthermore, democratic leadership encourages active student participation in the educational process, aligning with principles of student-centered pedagogy. By involving students in decision-making regarding their learning experiences, democratic leaders empower them to take ownership of their education and become more invested in academic pursuits (Smylie & Hart, 1999). This sense of ownership and autonomy has been linked to increased motivation and self-efficacy among students, both of which are strong predictors of academic achievement (Bandura, 1997).



Moreover, the collaborative nature of democratic leadership fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation within schools. Leaders who value input from all stakeholders are more likely to implement evidence-based practices and initiatives aimed at enhancing teaching and learning effectiveness (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). By encouraging experimentation and adaptation to changing educational needs, democratic leaders create dynamic learning environments that cater to diverse student populations (Fullan, 1991).

The literature consistently demonstrates the positive impact of democratic school leadership on student achievement. By promoting a supportive learning environment, fostering positive teacher-student relationships, and encouraging active student participation, democratic leaders contribute to improved academic outcomes for all students.

Enhanced Teacher Job Satisfaction and Retention:

One of the notable findings emerging from the literature review is the strong correlation between democratic leadership in schools and heightened levels of teacher job satisfaction and retention. Research consistently highlights the positive association between participative decision-making processes and teacher morale (Louis et al., 2010).

When teachers are actively engaged in the governance of their schools, feeling valued and respected as professionals, it significantly contributes to their overall job satisfaction (Louis et al., 2010). Democratic leadership fosters an environment where teachers feel empowered to contribute their ideas, concerns, and perspectives to decision-making processes regarding curriculum, school policies, and instructional strategies (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). This sense of ownership over their work and involvement in shaping the direction of the school enhances their professional fulfillment and commitment to the institution (Sergiovanni, 1990).

Moreover, the inclusive nature of democratic leadership cultivates a culture of trust and collaboration among faculty members. When teachers perceive that their voices are heard and their contributions are valued, it strengthens their sense of belonging and camaraderie within the school community (Gronn, 2008). This positive interpersonal dynamic not only enhances job satisfaction but also creates a supportive work environment that encourages collaboration, innovation, and continuous professional growth (Uy, et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the impact of democratic leadership on teacher retention is significant. Schools characterized by participatory decision-making structures tend to experience lower rates of teacher turnover (Louis et al., 2010). Retaining experienced and qualified educators is crucial for maintaining instructional continuity, preserving institutional knowledge, and sustaining positive school culture (Ingersoll, 2001). By prioritizing teacher empowerment and job satisfaction, democratic leaders mitigate the factors that contribute to teacher burnout and attrition, ultimately promoting greater stability and continuity within the teaching workforce (Sergiovanni, 1990).

The literature underscores the pivotal role of democratic leadership in enhancing teacher job satisfaction and retention. By involving teachers in decision-making processes, fostering a culture of trust and collaboration, and prioritizing their professional growth and well-being, democratic leaders create conditions that support the long-term commitment and effectiveness of educators within the school community.

Promotion of Inclusive School Climate:

Democratic leadership has been recognized as a key driver in cultivating a positive and inclusive school climate. The review underscores the pivotal role of democratic principles in fostering a sense of belonging, trust, and collaboration among all stakeholders within the school community (Gronn, 2008; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008).

When schools embrace democratic leadership, they prioritize transparency, open communication, and shared decision-making processes. By involving students, parents, teachers, and community members in important school decisions, democratic leaders create an environment where all voices are heard and valued (Martinez, et al., 2023). This inclusive approach to governance not only fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment but also promotes mutual respect and understanding among diverse stakeholders (Gronn, 2008).

Furthermore, democratic leadership cultivates a culture of collaboration and collective responsibility for the school's success. When stakeholders are actively engaged in shaping the school's policies, goals, and initiatives, they develop a shared sense of purpose and commitment to achieving common objectives (Groenewald, et al., 2023). This collaborative ethos extends beyond the school walls, fostering greater community engagement and support for educational initiatives (Gronn, 2008).

Moreover, the inclusive practices promoted by democratic leaders contribute to a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all students. When students feel that their voices are valued and their perspectives are



considered in decision-making processes, they are more likely to feel connected to their school community and motivated to participate in academic and extracurricular activities (Leithwood & Mascal, 2008).

Challenges and Implementation Barriers:

Although democratic school leadership offers numerous benefits, the review uncovered several challenges hindering its implementation. A primary obstacle is resistance to change, particularly in entrenched organizational cultures accustomed to traditional hierarchical structures (Smylie & Hart, 1999). School leaders may encounter opposition from stakeholders reluctant to relinquish control or accustomed to centralized decision-making processes.

Moreover, addressing power dynamics within educational institutions presents a significant challenge. In many cases, power imbalances among stakeholders, such as administrators, teachers, parents, and students, can impede the effective implementation of democratic leadership practices (Cordova Jr, et al., 2024). Overcoming these entrenched power dynamics requires deliberate efforts to build trust, foster collaboration, and promote shared decision-making among all stakeholders.

Additionally, the lack of support and training for leaders and stakeholders poses a barrier to the successful adoption of democratic leadership. School leaders may require specialized training in facilitation, conflict resolution, and consensus-building to effectively navigate the complexities of participatory decision-making (Smylie & Hart, 1999). Likewise, stakeholders need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to meaningfully engage in governance processes.

Ensuring equitable participation and representation across diverse stakeholder groups is another challenge highlighted in the review. Inclusive decision-making processes must actively address issues of privilege, voice, and representation to ensure that the needs and perspectives of all stakeholders are adequately considered (Sykes, et al., 2012). This necessitates creating structures and mechanisms that promote equitable access to decision-making opportunities and facilitate the inclusion of marginalized voices.

Addressing these barriers requires sustained efforts to build capacity, foster a culture of collaboration, and address systemic inequities within educational systems. By providing ongoing support, professional development, and resources, educational leaders can cultivate the conditions necessary for successful implementation of democratic school leadership practices.

Conclusion:

The integrative literature review has provided valuable insights into the role of democratic school leadership in creating better educational environments. The findings highlight the significant impact of democratic leadership practices on various aspects of school effectiveness, including student achievement, teacher job satisfaction, retention, and school climate.

The review underscores the importance of fostering collaboration, inclusivity, and accountability within educational institutions through participatory governance structures. Schools that embrace democratic principles tend to cultivate supportive learning environments, where students feel empowered, engaged, and motivated to succeed academically (Abella, et al, 2024). Moreover, democratic leadership promotes positive teacher-student relationships, enhances teacher job satisfaction, and contributes to the retention of qualified educators.

Additionally, the review highlights the role of democratic leadership in promoting a positive and inclusive school climate, characterized by trust, collaboration, and mutual respect among stakeholders. By involving students, parents, teachers, and community members in decision-making processes, democratic leaders create a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for the school's success, leading to greater community engagement and support.

However, the study also identified several challenges and barriers to implementing democratic school leadership, including resistance to change, entrenched power dynamics, and the lack of support or training for leaders and stakeholders (Andrin, et al., 2023). Addressing these barriers requires sustained efforts to build capacity, foster a culture of collaboration, and address systemic inequities within educational systems.

Moving forward, further research is needed to explore the nuances of democratic leadership practices and their impact on different educational contexts. Additionally, efforts to promote democratic school leadership should be accompanied by policy initiatives and professional development programs aimed at equipping educational leaders and stakeholders with the necessary skills and resources to effectively implement participatory governance structures.



The findings of this study underscore the importance of democratic school leadership as a means of creating better schools for all stakeholders. By embracing principles of collaboration, inclusivity, and accountability, educational leaders can foster environments that support the holistic development and success of students, teachers, and communities alike.

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