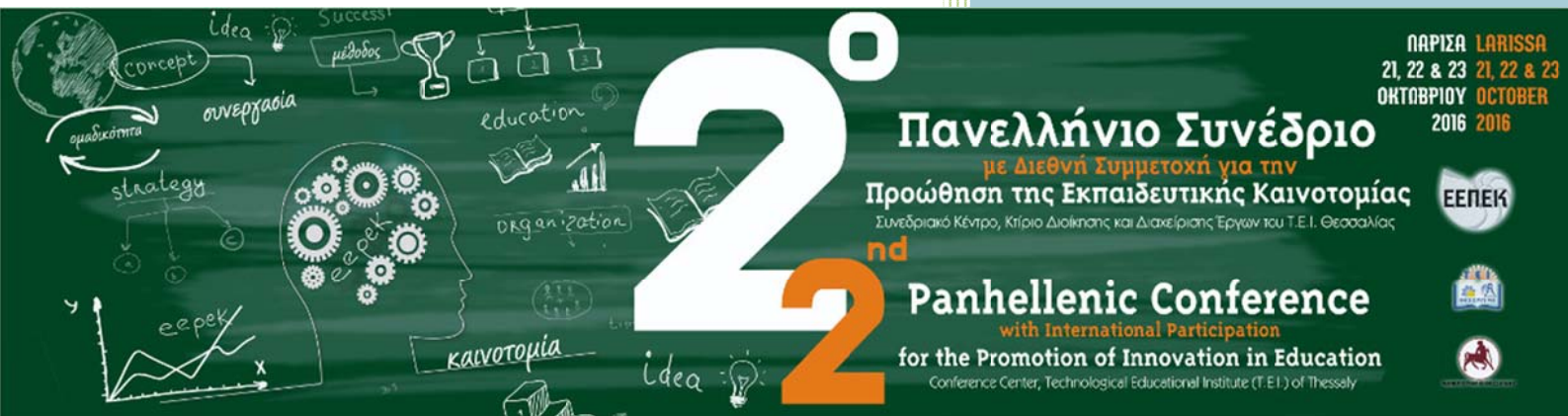


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The most effective learning strategies and instructional models for school leaders' professional development: a review of recent researches

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Abstract

There is a vast body of literature on leadership training, moreover, systematic reviews about recent studies are lacking. This paper is a review of current studies focusing on a systematic approach. We have conducted a systematic review of all published works in the last ten years. The literature search has been performed using electronic database searching and general purpose search engines on the internet such as "Google scholar". As results of the conducted review, 52 studies have been collected for analysis. These studies have been reviewed and analyzed through a set of specific and well-defined categories. This paper synthesizes the quantitative and qualitative results of the review. The outcomes show that professional learning and development for school leaders needs systematic improvement, suggesting paying more attention to their development needs and to the socialization processes involved.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: literature review, school leadership, school leaders, leadership training, leadership development

Introduction

In the last decade, important international and comparative surveys (TALIS 2008, 2013), situate school leaders in a key policy priority for the development of quality of education addressing every country to the economic, social and political development. More specifically, the TALIS Technical Report (OCDE, 2014) highlighted important data about school leaders training and about their working experience, linking these factors with the effectiveness of the school. On the same line, an OECD research (Beatriz, Deborah, & Hunter, 2008), finalized to the development of policies of educational leadership, analyzed policies and practices of school leadership around the world.

These surveys are part of the research area known as School Effectiveness Research, finalized to investigate factors related to student learning and outcomes. These researches highlighted an interdependency between the quality of school leadership and the school quality level (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). The quality leadership has in fact been identified as one of the strategic factors of the school quality improvement, as well as school leaders leadership style resulted in being the better observation point to identify educational problems in a school.

As regards to school leaders' recruitment and education, interesting data can be extracted from a recent Eurydice report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013). Combining statistical data and qualitative information about European education systems, the report shows a comparative analysis about the different school leaders' recruitment and training procedures in Europe. School leaders' recruitment and their initial and continuing training vary significantly from country to country. National education policies define the conditions of access to the position of school head, the recruitment procedures, the initial and in-service training, requirements and plans. These depend on legal status and on professional profile required by different nations and based on decentralism of educational system and on the level of school autonomy.

In this contest, many empirical researches about leadership frameworks and school leaders' professional training and education are available.

Lacking of a recent systematic review on these issues, convinced us in starting a research path finalized to highlight theories and concepts related to international learning models. The analysis of instructional strategies and of learning approaches returned important data to carry out evaluations about learning models effectiveness.

This paper reports the quantitative and qualitative outcomes of a literature review of published works on leadership initial and in-service training. This work represents the first part of a larger study realized within the research framework of my Ph.D. in Information Engineering (University of Florence) finalized to identify an effective and efficient learning model for school leaders of Italian school.

Method

In this section, we present research criteria adopted to make research strategy repeatable and with scientific relevance. The choice to use research criteria rigorous and transparent is finalized to obtain a systematic and well defined revision process

The research question

The first step affording a literature systematic review has been the definition of research question able to clarify our cognitive targets and able to address literature analysis clearly and precisely.

Starting from the question “Which are the most effective learning strategies and instructional models for school leaders professional development?” we analysed the international literature in order to individuate empirical evidences about: learning model types and instructional strategies more widespread in the international scenario, the most effectiveness training plans, the usage of ICT in school leaders training.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

We chose to collocate our review within last decade, because of the growing interest from international literature and from educational policies for school leadership.

With regard to typologies of publications included into the review, we selected empirical studies and included not only scientific articles published on peer reviewed academic journals but also peer reviewed conference proceedings, research reports, doctoral dissertations, technical reports and publications of public and private research institutions and organizations.

About the choice of source of data to be used for the review, as well as for other procedural decisions, we inspired to the work of Ranieri e Manca (2013).

The search strategy has been addressed to a wide survey, not limited to a unique database. We highlighted three international electronic databases on which we conducted parallel researches: ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Scopus (SciVerse) and Web of Knowledge (Thomson Reuters), finally general-purpose search engines on the internet such as Google scholar. This procedure has sometimes outputted duplicates, but allowed an in-depth comparison between sources.

As last criteria, the research in the international literature has been accomplished with the English language, individuating twentyfive keywords combined using Boolean operators.

Many and repeated searching sessions has been held in parallel on the three databases and using the Google Scholar search engine. To enforce coherency and orderliness to the whole process we set up the search criteria using the same keywords and the same Boolean expressions, including or excluding specific operators (AND, OR, NOT), for all the sessions. Two hundred thirty-two references have been considered by reading titles and abstracts (ERIC, 81 studies; Scopus, 45 studies, Web of Knowledge, 32 studies; Google scholar, 74 studies).

Fine-grained selection identified 69 studies to whom we added 10 studies individuated using suggestions from personal contacts, websites, hand searching of journals and quotes from reference lists. Overall, the review individuated 79 relevant studies; these studies have been entirely read.

Inspiring to Newman and Elbourne (2004), we arranged a list of categories and under categories (see data matrixes, Table 1 and 2) for the evaluation and synthesis of the selected literature.

Categories have been identified in order to describe the studies also as regards to the learning approach so that, in the perspective of our research question, from the analysis would emerge the

learning models, the instructional strategies employed, and their effect in terms of educational effectiveness.

From the data matrixes, we excluded 27 theoretical studies not containing empirical data and outcomes. The final number of the selected studies suitable to be included into the matrix is 52. The systematic review of the literature has been completed at 2015, December. In the following paragraphs we report the results.

Results

In this section, we show the features of the 52 studies analysed in the review. First, we organized the papers considering the publication year, the geographical area, the setting, the aims and the research design (Table 1).

Second, we aggregated them according to learning approach and learning mode (Table 2).

Key features of the studies

According to Table 1, researches are positioned in North America (24 studies) and in Europe (13 studies). Relatively to these two countries, the numbers of studies are: USA - 22; Canada - 2; UK - 5; Cyprus - 4; Germany - 3.

As shown in Table 1, the most of the studies are concentrated between 2010 and 2015. This is the period in which important international inquires, collocated into a research area known as School Effectiveness Research, highlighted important data about school leader education and about their work experience, linking these factors with the school effectiveness. In this period has been revealed an increasing interest toward the quality of school leadership and towards learning approaches of school leaders' professional development.

Many of the reviewed studies take beginning school leaders as their main participants (24 studies), only 9 studies deals with professional development, while 19 studies deals with both the training areas. These numbers are justified by the educational policies of the international scenario norming initial training of school leaders.

In many European and extra European countries, educational policies require for the future school leaders a specific training to hold the new role and a certification attesting specific requirements. The training may take place before the access to the position of school head, during enrollment or during their first years in the profession. It mainly deals with national programmes but also with independent non-governatives organizations sponsored programmes (academies, universities, schools, etc.). On the contrary, continuous professional development is not the main focus of international educational policies.

According to Table 1, about the research method the most of the studies have been conducted with qualitative research strategies (34 studies), while few with quantitative approach (7 studies), and finally the mixed-method approach has been applied in very few articles (11 studies).

Relating to the research instruments, the scholars used observations, semi-structured interviews, open questions standardized questionnaires, case studies, focus groups.

Table 1. Key features of the studies

Year	No. of studies	Geographical area										Settings			Aims		Research method	
		UE	NA	SA	ME	A	Af	O	IT	PD	B	E	ATN	M	QtA	QI		
2005	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1		
2006	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	1	1		
2007	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	2		
2008	3	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	3	0	0	1	2		
2009	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1		
2010	7	3	2	0	0	1	1	0	3	3	1	6	1	1	0	6		
2011	4	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	1	4	0	1	0	3		
2012	6	0	5	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	5	1	2	2	2		
2013	11	4	4	0	0	2	1	0	3	4	4	9	2	2	1	8		
2014	10	0	4	0	0	4	2	0	5	0	5	9	1	4	2	4		
2015	5	2	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	3	4	1	1	0	4		
TOT	52	13	24	0	0	7	5	3	24	9	19	46	6	11	7	34		

Note: UE = Europe; NA = North America; SA = South America; ME = Middle East; A = Asia; Af = Africa; O = Oceania; IT = Induction training - beginning leaders (zero to two years); PD = Professional development – intermediate, experienced and very experienced leaders (>3 years); B = Both; EE = Evaluating the efficacy of a training programme/methodology ; ATN = Analysing the training needs; MA = Mixed-method approach; QtA = Quantitative approach; QIA = Qualitative approach

Main learning strategies and instructional models

Table 2 summarizes the results presented in this section. About the learning approach and the learning mode, data shows that some of them found a very rare implementation within the contexts of the analysis.

More specifically, only two studies reported experiences of informal learning, two studies are focused on experiential learning, while three of them are focused on content delivery approach.

Data can be explained based on what emerged in the previous table. Almost half of the studies (25) deal with initial training of school leaders, this training is necessarily held in institutional and formal contexts.

As regards to the low percentage distribution of the experiential learning, to the methods based on self-assessment, reflection and planning and of content delivery approach, we can affirm that these methodologies are widely used in the school leaders training but within multi-phase programmes. In our review they are documented in the multi-phased and integrated approach (15 studies) characterized by the succession of different educational strategies (workshops, seminars, university courses, coaching and mentoring sessions, collaborative work, skill assessments, simulations, case studies, problem solving, networking, internships).

A very interesting data is the number of studies about coaching and mentoring (17 studies). The most of the studies (10 studies) refers mentoring e coaching experiences applied to the induction training (pre-service training or during first two years following nomination). Only two studies of these, target the school leaders' continuous professional development. Finally, four of these studies are related to beginning leaders, experienced and very experienced leaders.

Being approaches for on-the-job learning, coaching and mentoring, result to be functional to school leaders professional and educational needs, specifically during the phase of induction training.

Finally, referring to Table 2, with regard to the learning modes, the selected studies highlight a wider spreading of face-to-face mode (24 studies) and of blended learning mode (20 studies) than e-learning mode (3 studies). These results can be explained based on the large number of studies related to coaching and mentoring approach and multi-phased and integrated approach. Mentoring and coaching are realized face-to-face, while the multi-phased and integrated approach need blended learning mode.

Table 2. Learning approach and learning mode

Learning approach						
Content delivery	Autonomous and informal learning	Collaborative/ cooperative learning	Mentoring/ Coaching	Self-assessment/ reflection and planning	Experiential learning	Multi-phased and integrated approach
3	4	4	17	7	2	15

Learning mode			
Face-to-face	E-learning	Blended learning	Not specified
24	3	20	5

Discussion Analysis

In this section, we analyze the findings of the 52 identified studies in the light of the following items extracted from Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Training Evaluation Model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006) and re-elaborated for the research purpose: (1) Reaction: How school leaders reacted to the training approach; (2) Learning and behaviors: Which learning approach has been more effective in terms of learning improvement and behavior changing.

Reaction: How school leaders reacted to the training approach

With regard to how school leaders reacted to the training approach, on the basis of the papers analysed, the results suggest criticalities of national programmes related to novice school leaders (Bush et al., 2011; Nicolaidou & Petridou, 2011; Wilson & Xue, 2013). These programmes have been built on multi-phased and multi-method systems where transmissive strategies are combined with school-based interactive and active methods. The related satisfaction surveys highlight a low level of satisfaction about the training activities based on content delivery approach (seminars and courses). In two cases (Michaelidou & Pashiardis, 2009; Zachariou et al., 2013), school leaders declare to be poorly equipped for their new role as leaders of sustainable schools. They revealed that they would have preferred to be trained before their promotion to the post, in order to be better prepared and trained for their leadership duties and role. It looks to be more useful and more convenient for the leaders to attend school based in-service training and experiential workshops.

One Taiwanese study (Chen & Chen, 2014) highlights the efficacy of workplace experiential learning after pre-service training. All participants viewed internship as a necessary and valuable process for aspiring school leaders improving their subsequent school leadership and administration. A further Turkish study (Yildirim, 2010) confirms the effectiveness of social learning, cooperative learning methods, and brainstorming techniques. While in-service training programs in Turkey are generally not considered successful, the participants of a new in-service training seminar, designed and implemented according to the Kolb Learning Model and based on collaborative works, were extremely satisfied.

On the other hand, scholars have emphasized the positive trainees' reaction of informal learning and of a mixed formal-informal learning approach (Coleman, 2010; Naicker and Naidoo, 2014; Sauers and Richardson, 2015; Zhang and Brundrett, 2010). In a mentoring programme (Scott, 2010) the mentees liked both the formal and informal aspects of the programme, although

preferred the informal mentoring relationship. Moreover, experiences within communities of practice, show that school leaders recognize the valuable contribution that the community made to their own and to other participants' professional development (Coleman, 2010; Naicker and Naidoo, 2014; Sauers and Richardson, 2015)

Learning and behaviors: Which learning approach has been more effective in terms of learning improvement and behavior changing

With regard to which learning approach has been more effective in terms of learning improvement and behavior changing, almost half of the studies confirm the positive impact of mentoring and coaching in leadership identity development. The mentoring/coaching approach is moreover the key component of many practice-based programme documented in many selected studies (Bush, Kiggundu, & Moorosi, 2011; Barnett, 2013; Enomoto & Gardiner, 2006; Mestry & Schmidt, 2010; Lochmiller, 2014; Moorosi, 2014; Rieckhoff, 2014; Moorosi, 2014). Mentoring and coaching methodologies are internationally recognized having a pivot role in transfer of competence from veteran to novice leaders (Scott, 2010). In one case (Patti, Holzer, Stern, & Brackett, 2012) scholars highlight the efficacy of personal-professional coaching in a process of self-reflection about professional roles and practices, leadership strengths and challenges, and emotional and social skill development. In the same way, a study (Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013) points to the importance of coaching and mentoring as potential scaffolds to create an appreciation of self-efficacy's value at all stages of the headship journey.

On the other hand, scholars highlight the efficacy of mentoring and coaching methodologies whenever these are activated within peer groups (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Boerema, 2011; Moorosi, 2014; Owen, 2012; Smith, 2007). For example, a group coaching format experience (Aas & Vavik, 2015) demonstrates the importance of building a social learning environment with opportunities for contextual feedback and reflections from other leaders. Similarly, in a community of practice-based mentoring model (Smith, 2007), the group members are all mentors and also simultaneously mentees. They experience particular ways of belonging and participating, and particular forms of intellectual activity culminating in highly significant personal, career and social outcomes for its members. In both cases, the group setting allows the participants to influence one another and to collaborate and cooperate, thereby developing social competence.

Many of the studies focus on interpersonal relationships among participants considering their pivotal role to improve knowledge, skill levels, and attitudes and for the overall success of a learning programme (Bridwell-Mitchell & Lant, 2013; Ford & Vaughn, 2011; McCulla & Degenhardt, 2015; Swaffield, Jull, & Ampah-Mensah, 2013). They confirms that meaningful interaction among colleagues and with critical friends (professional learning groups, collaborative learning communities, critical friends groups, communities of practice), is the better strategy to develop appropriate leadership behaviors in school leaders.

As we have seen, there are few studies entirely dedicated to informal learning experiences in the school leaders' professional development. In between them are particularly meaningful the experiences of peer learning and mentoring and coaching informal practices, addressed to less experienced colleagues in a community of professional practice. (Coleman, 2010; Naicker & Naidoo, 2014; Sauer & Richardson, 2015; Zhang & Brundrett, 2010). Communities of practices play a pivot role in all the phases of school leaders' professional development. These build up spontaneously during shared work experiences and break school leaders' isolation (Naicker & Naidoo, 2014). Communities of practice are the ideal place to activate professional practice self-reflection experiences, to enhance peer communication and to share activities, in order to incentives solidarity about common set of problems (Coleman, 2010).

Moreover, a group of studies recommend to pay more attention to recruit high-quality leaders through integrated attention to candidate selection and development (Cowie & Crawford, 2008, Cowie & Crawford, 2009; Hilliard, 2015; Russell & Sabina, 2014). Analyzed studies highlight the importance to identify and develop high-quality school leaders by a principal succession planning programme. The most important step in preparing new leaders is to "get the right people on the bus" through well-developed criteria and assessment (Russell & Sabina, 2014). Following this first

phase there is the in-service training which should focus on engagement with authentic leadership experiences, according to Kolb's experiential learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). In the studies, programmes for developing high-potential candidates include a range of strategies: shadowing (McCulla & Degenhardt, 2015), engagement in action research projects (Russell & Sabina, 2014), usage of video of practice, only recently become a critical part of leadership development training (Clark, 2012). Even if no any preparation programme can completely prepare school leaders for the experience of leadership, school leaders should be active participants in their own learning processes, and, supported by their peers, should use their personal skills and strategies to respond to problems of real or simulated practice.

Finally, examined studies recommend to pay more attention to support school leaders induction. This has to be carried out in the form of a protected and driven integration into the new role, supported by specifically trained professionals having the function of support (Hilliard, 2015).

Conclusions

The quantitative results of the review show that educational policies mainly focused on school leaders' induction training. Half of the studies we have selected are related to school leaders' initial training, therefore the majority of them closely match this target as regards to learning model and learning strategies. This suggests that more studies are needed on school leaders' continuous learning. More researches are required on informal learning too, playing instead a fundamental role in all the phases of school leaders' professional development.

Finally, numerical data show a very low number of studies related to e-learning moreover considering the wide spreading of new virtual spaces for learning and communication and new mode of informal networking.

Relating to qualitative analysis, the literature review clearly shows that many programmes do not meet leadership development needs. Professional learning and development for school leaders needs systematic improvement. The scholars suggest paying more attention to their development needs and to the socialization processes involved. They highlight the efficacy of networks of peers and the value of learning through the establishment of critical friends. The importance of the interpersonal relationships among participants emerged as a key ingredient in the school leaders' professional development.

Moreover, the literature we have reviewed reinforces the importance of coaching and mentoring as potential scaffolds to create an appreciation of self-efficacy's value at all stages of the headship journey.

Finally, scholars recommend to pay more attention to school leaders' succession planning (recruiting, developing, and placing school leaders). The selection and development of leadership candidates are seen as the core activities in a succession-planning programme. Identification of high-potential school leaders and their engagement in authentic leadership experiences is recommended. The scholars suggest to pay attention to strategies to support school leaders' induction too. Significant component of plan of induction are learning communities by veteran and novice leaders and school-based mentorship or coaching programmes.

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