

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN DRIVING INNOVATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN KOSOVO

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UDC: 373.2/3.015:316.422(497.115)

ABSTRACT:

This study examines the role of educational leadership in fostering innovation and improving the quality of early childhood education in Kosovo. It explores how school leaders influence teaching practices, strengthen teacher motivation, and shape professional culture in early learning environments. The central assumption is that effective leadership drives pedagogical improvement by empowering teachers and creating supportive, collaborative school climates.

A qualitative research design was used, based on semi-structured interviews with ten leaders from preschool and early primary institutions. The analysis showed that clear vision-building, emotional encouragement, constructive feedback, and collaborative practices significantly enhance teacher confidence and willingness to implement new teaching approaches. Leaders also stressed the importance of modeling innovative practice, promoting reflection, and building trusting relationships.

Despite these strengths, participants reported challenges such as limited resources, insufficient professional development, and policy barriers that restrict innovation. Nonetheless, committed leadership helped teachers remain motivated and professionally engaged. The study highlights the need for leadership training and improved policy support to strengthen innovation in early childhood settings. Overall, the findings provide insight into leadership practices that contribute to teacher empowerment and higher-quality learning environments in emerging education systems.

Keywords: *Educational leadership, early childhood education, teacher motivation, innovation, Kosovo.*

Introduction

Early childhood education is a crucial stage in human development, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, socio-emotional growth, and essential cognitive skills. As global education systems increasingly emphasize creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital competence, early learning environments must move beyond traditional practices and offer space for exploration,

curiosity, and active engagement. Achieving this requires continuous teacher support, motivation, and opportunities for innovation.

In Kosovo, improvements in early childhood education depend strongly on the quality of leadership within institutions. School leaders shape the school's vision, guide teacher practices, and create climates that encourage collaboration and reflective learning. Limited resources, high workloads, and inconsistent professional development opportunities continue to challenge innovation, making leadership even more critical. This study explores how leaders in early childhood settings influence innovation, teacher motivation, and pedagogical practice, and identifies strategies that promote professional growth and a culture of lifelong learning.

Literature Review

A review of current research reveals that leadership is a central factor in fostering high-quality, innovative, and collaborative early childhood learning environments. For innovation to be effectively implemented in schools, strong leadership and clear guidance from the principal are essential. In such contexts, the principal must adopt an instructional leadership style. Instructional leadership positions the principal as a guide for teachers, students, and staff in establishing an effective organizational structure that supports high-quality teaching and learning. (Dat; T. V & Thach & Cam Tu, 2023).

For school to be successful, the principal has to balance the administrative tasks and instructional tasks. Finally, it is recommended that the principals need to be trained in school management and leadership in order to be competent as instructional leader along with suggestions for further empirical investigation (Southworth, 2002).

It is important to understand the significance of your role as a leader when using evidence and making decisions.

To illustrate this, let's use the Funnel of Influence model (a model for understanding the many influences which shape who we are and what we espouse, intend, enact and implicitly believe. It is a tool for researchers seeking to go beyond surface-level acceptance of espoused or enacted practice).

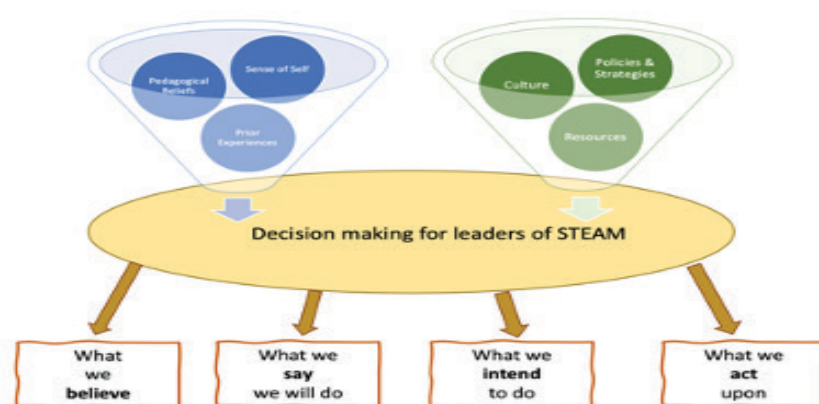


Figure 1. The Funnel of Influence (Aubrey-Smith, 2023)

These subtle differences make a huge impact on how we engage with evidence and decision-making because they create all kinds of preconceived ideas, assumptions, and biases about what will impact children's learning.

Here are five ways that strong educational leadership can make a huge impact on driving innovation (Jason, 2023):

- 1. Setting a vision**
- 2. Providing resources**
- 3. Fostering partnerships**
- 4. Supporting teachers**
- 5. Celebrating success**

Michelle explains that a focus on driving innovation in a school challenges leaders and teachers to think differently about pedagogical approaches, but leaders cannot assume that changes will happen easily or automatically. She explains that the introduction of collaborative professional learning experiences can help in making teachers feel more comfortable when implementing new ideas and structures into their classrooms (Michelle, 2020)

Methodology

The objective of this study is to examine how school leadership fosters innovation and improves teaching practices in early childhood education. The research aims to identify leadership strategies that motivate teachers, strengthen professional culture, and support the adoption of innovative approaches in preschool and early primary settings.

Research Questions

1. How do school leaders influence innovation and instructional practices?
2. What strategies do they use to motivate and support teachers?
3. How do leadership practices contribute to professional development?
4. What challenges and successes do leaders encounter?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with school leaders working in early childhood and early primary institutions. The interview protocol explored leadership strategies, challenges, and professional culture. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework to identify key patterns in leadership practice. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was ensured.

This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of leadership behavior, decision-making, and support mechanisms that shape early childhood learning environments.

Research Problem

Early childhood education plays a foundational role in children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, making the quality of teaching and learning in this stage critically important. In Kosovo, ongoing educational reforms emphasize innovation, learner-centered approaches, and improved teaching quality in early childhood and early primary education. However, despite these reform efforts, many early childhood institutions continue to face challenges related to instructional quality, teacher motivation, and the consistent implementation of innovative teaching practices.

One of the key issues underlying these challenges is the limited empirical understanding of how educational leadership influences innovation and teaching improvement in early childhood settings. While leadership is widely recognized as a central factor in school effectiveness, research in Kosovo has largely focused on curriculum, policy, or teacher performance, with comparatively little attention given to leadership practices in early childhood education. As a result, there is insufficient evidence on how school leaders support teachers, shape professional culture, and respond to contextual constraints such as limited resources and policy demands.

This study addresses this gap by examining the role of educational leadership in fostering innovation and improving teaching quality in early childhood education in Kosovo. It seeks to understand how school leaders influence teacher motivation, promote collaborative professional practices, and create supportive learning environments that encourage pedagogical change. By focusing on leaders' perspectives and experiences, the study aims to contribute empirical insights that can inform leadership development, institutional practices, and policy initiatives in early childhood education.

Findings

The interviews with early childhood leaders revealed several key themes related to innovation and teaching improvement. Leaders emphasized the importance of vision-building, emotional encouragement, and a positive school climate in motivating teachers to adopt new instructional approaches. Collaboration—through peer mentoring, team planning, and shared reflection—was also identified as a central factor that strengthens professional growth. Although challenges such as limited resources, insufficient training, and policy constraints were frequently mentioned, leaders reported using partnerships, community support, and personal modeling of innovation to overcome these barriers. Overall, the findings show that strong, supportive leadership is crucial for shaping school culture and enabling innovation in early childhood education.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the central role of educational leadership in promoting innovation and improving teaching quality in early childhood education. Leaders emphasized vision-building, emotional support, and collaboration as key strategies for motivating teachers and encouraging the adoption of innovative instructional approaches. These findings are consistent with existing research on transformational leadership, which emphasizes shared vision, empowerment, and professional trust as drivers of school improvement.

A significant contribution of this study is the emphasis on emotional encouragement and relational leadership. Leaders reported that trust, recognition, and open communication were essential for fostering teacher confidence and willingness to experiment with new practices. This is particularly important in early childhood settings, where teaching requires creativity, reflection,

and responsiveness to young learners' needs. By creating a supportive professional climate, leaders reduced teachers' fear of failure and strengthened their engagement in continuous improvement.

The study also revealed that collaboration—through peer mentoring, shared planning, and reflective dialogue—plays a critical role in strengthening professional capacity. Such collaborative practices enabled teachers to learn from one another and to collectively address instructional challenges, reinforcing a culture of shared responsibility for teaching quality.

Despite these positive leadership practices, participants identified persistent challenges, including limited resources, insufficient professional development opportunities, and restrictive policy frameworks. However, leaders demonstrated adaptive strategies, such as modeling innovative practices, leveraging community support, and maintaining strong interpersonal relationships. These findings suggest that effective leadership can mitigate structural constraints and sustain innovation even in resource-limited contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that educational leadership is a key factor in fostering innovation and improving teaching quality in early childhood education in Kosovo. Leadership practices such as clear vision-setting, emotional support, collaborative professional structures, and the modeling of innovative teaching significantly influence teacher motivation, confidence, and professional engagement. These practices contribute to the creation of positive school cultures that support continuous improvement and learner-centered education.

Although early childhood leaders face ongoing challenges related to limited resources, professional development, and policy constraints, the findings show that committed and supportive leadership can sustain innovation and enhance teaching quality. This highlights the importance of investing in leadership development programs that strengthen leaders' pedagogical, relational, and strategic capacities.

The study concludes that strengthening institutional and policy support for early childhood leadership is essential for advancing high-quality, innovative, and inclusive early learning environments. Future efforts should focus on aligning leadership training, professional development, and policy frameworks to ensure sustainable improvement in early childhood education in Kosovo.

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