The Relations of Transformational Leadership and Empowerment with Student Perceived Academic Performance: A Study among Indian Commerce Students

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Abstract

This paper examines the relations of transformational leadership and empowerment with student perceived academic performance. Indian students enrolled in business management program at colleges and universities in Punjab and Delhi areas of India were surveyed to find out their perceptions as to whether transformational leadership used by faculty members and empowerment improve student perceived academic performance. Positive relationships between i) student perceived transformational leadership used by instructors/professors and student perceived academic performance, and ii) student perceived empowerment and student perceived academic performance were found. This paper offers useful insights for instructors/professors based on empirical evidence.

Keywords: Transformational leadership; empowerment; student perceived academic performance.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the relations of transformational leadership and empowerment with student perceived academic performance. The trends of "for-profit organizations" in the education sector have started taking place in India. Choudaha [1] indicates that Indian education sector has gained significant attention from investors in year 2009. Since trends of "for-profit" organizations have started taking place, it is important to improve the student retention because it has a negative impact on the revenues and the bottom lines of the educational institutions.

Although, students represent an important source of revenue, they create some challenges for colleges and universities because of different learning styles. Asian students from different geographic areas have different behaviors, cultures, attitudes, and learning styles [2], which in turn, lead to student leadership issues and challenges for instructors/professors [3]. When instructors/professors are unable to overcome with the leadership issues, students tend to withdrawal from the education program which is not in the favor of the educational institutions. The higher withdrawal rates from degree programs can be due to poor performance in the classrooms and exams.

The declining retention rate in institutions for higher learning is not a new problem but it has been recognized major issues for colleges and universities [4]. Lauerman [5] indicates that about 57 percent of students at 16 for-profit colleges who started classes in the 2008-2009 academic year dropped out from the education program. Although, for decades, getting more students into colleges and universities has been the top priority of India's higher education leaders, the reality is that a few who go to college/university finish a degree. Therefore, it is important to find strategies that improve student perceived academic performance, which in turn, will help to improve student retention.

Transformational leadership when employed by instructors/professors and empowerment hold great promise for colleges and universities because they can be used to improve student perceived academic performance. The

concept and definition of transformational leadership and the embodiment of that leadership in transformation leaders were first coined by Burns [6], and then extended and operationalized by Bass [7] as "leadership and performance beyond expectations." Transformational leadership, in the context of this study, is defined as the extent to which instructors/professors motivate and encourage students to use their own judgment and intelligence to solve education related problems, transfer missions to students, and express appreciation for good work.

The term "empowerment" in management literature appears to have come into general usage in the early 1980s [8]. Student empowerment, in the context of this study, is defined as the extent to which students feel that their instructors/professors: i) permit them to use their own intelligence to solve study problems, ii) encourage them to handle their study problems, iii) trust their intelligence, and iv) allow them freedom in their study.

Since transformational leadership and empowerment hold a great promise for improving student perceived academic performance, the purpose of this study is to explore these affects and relationships on Indian undergraduate commerce students. The Indian undergraduate commerce students were chosen as a sampling frame because transformational leadership and empowerment concepts are new to them. There are a very few schools that use transformational leadership and empowerment concepts at the senior secondary school level.

There has been a very little research conducted to test the relationships between i) transformational leadership and student perceived academic performance and ii) empowerment and student perceived academic performance. However, authors such as Ross and Gray [9] have tested relationship between transformational leadership and student achievement. In addition, Gondal and Khan [10] and Abbas and Yaqoob [11] have tested relationships between empowerment and employee performance by collecting data from service industry. The results can be generalized to the educational services industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Relationship between Transformational Leadership and Student Perceived Academic Performance

Transformational leadership used by instructors/professors plays an important role in student perceived academic performance. Bass [7] advocated transformational leadership for improved performance. The concept of leadership has been thoroughly examined in the school context by Leithwood and his associates together with its effects on an array of student outcomes [12]. These investigations have led to the development of a model of transformational leadership for improved school performance [13-15]. Drawing on these studies, transformational practices in this model include describing study goals to students and providing intellectual stimulation.

A review of the UK effectiveness research [16] resulted in the identification of shared vision and goals that help improve student performance. Ross and Gray [9] found that schools with higher levels of transformational leadership had higher student achievement. They also argue that increasing the transformational leadership practices in schools makes a small but practically important contribution to overall student achievement.

Transformational leadership has been found to encourage open communication with followers [17], which in turn, enhance student learning in the classroom. In addition, instructors/professors by using transformational leadership can clarify the goals and objectives of the course, which in turn, help students to enhance their perceived academic performance. Therefore, it is theorized that transformational leadership where implemented should enhance student perceived academic performance. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: The higher the level of transformational leadership used by instructors/professor, the higher the level of student perceived academic performance.

2.2 The Relations of Empowerment with Student Perceived Academic Performance

Student empowerment seems a logical reaction to current demands for college/university reform and accountability to student perceived academic performance. One can understand a lack of student engagement in learning, for instance, as a reaction to a lack of empowerment. Because of denied formal power in the classroom, students frequently disengage from learning [18] which has a negative impact on their academic performance.

The empowered students develop their ability, confidence, and motivation to succeed academically [19]. McQuillan [18] indicate that the empowered students internalize higher-level cognitive skills and assume greater control over setting their own learning goals, which in turn, improve student perceived academic performance. Gondal and Khan [10] found a positive relationship between team empowerment and team performance. Abbas and Yaqoob [11] also found a positive relationship between empowerment and employee performance.

If one believes knowledge is power, it seems reasonable to assume that, at its heart, colleges and universities should be empowering students to improve their perceived academic performance. While few would deny this assertion, "student empowerment" may be one of the most important tools to improve student perceived academic performance. Therefore it is theorized that student empowerment where implemented should show improved student perceived academic performance. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: The higher the level of student empowerment, the higher the level of students' perceived academic performance.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized survey research, a descriptive field study design. To test the hypotheses, $p < .05$ significance level was used to accept or reject a null hypothesis.

3.2 Measurement

In order to remain (for comparison and reference reasons) consistent with previous research, the measures were taken from three referent studies, which in turn are based on previous studies in marketing, education, and psychology. All measures pertaining to i) transformational leadership were taken from Gill *et al.* [17], ii) student empowerment were taken from Hartline and Ferrell [20], and iii) student performance were taken from Neumann and Neumann [21].

All the scale items were pre-tested for construct validity. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each item (statement), using a five-point Likert scale providing an interval level of measurement.

Transformational leadership (TL) is operationally defined as the extent to which instructors/professors motivate and encourage students to use their own judgment and intelligence to solve education related problems, transfer missions to students, and express appreciation for good work. Gill *et al.* [17] used the four-item tolerance-of-freedom scale, which measures intellectual stimulation of teachers. Based on Gill *et al.'s* [17] CFA (confirmatory factor analysis), all four items were selected to measure the "transformational leadership" variable in this study. Scale items were reworded to apply to students in the education field and the reliability of these re-worded items was re-tested. The Cronbach alpha on the responses of the thirty-one commerce students who participated in the pre-test of the above scale items was 0.83.

Student empowerment (SE) is operationalized as the extent to which students feel that their instructors/professors i) permit them to use their own intelligence to solve study problems, ii) encourage them to handle their study problems, iii) trust their intelligence, and iv) allow them freedom in their study. Hartline and Ferrell [20] used the eight-item tolerance-of-freedom scale, which measures the degree to which managers

encourage initiative, give employees freedom, and trust employees to use their own judgment. Based on confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) loading scores, four items were selected to measure the "student empowerment" dimension. Scale items were reworded to apply to students in the education industry and the reliability (internal consistency) of these re-worded items was re-tested. The Cronbach alpha on the responses of the thirty-one commerce students who participated in the pre-test of the above scale items was 0.73.

Student perceived academic performance (SPAP) is operationalized as the extent to which students feel that they are i) able to use their study skills effectively to learn course material, ii) successful in learning course material, and iii) successful to accomplish in developing many valuable skills. Neumann and Neumann [21] used three items to measure students' perceived performance. Based on the CFA reported by Neumann and Neumann [21], all three items were selected to measure "student perceived academic performance" variable. Scale items were re-worded to apply to students in the education field and the reliability of these re-worded items was re-tested. The Cronbach alpha on the responses of the thirty-one commerce students who participated in the pre-test of the above scale items was 0.77.

3.3 Sample

Punjab (Chandigarh, Ludhiana, and Banga) and Delhi areas of India were chosen as the research site to collect data. Given that the population is "abstract" (i.e., it was not possible to obtain a list of all members of the focal population) [22, p. 101], a non-probability (purposive) sample was obtained. In a purposive sample, participants are screened for inclusion based on criteria associated with members of the focal population. The focal population was comprised of undergraduate level commerce students in the Punjab and Delhi areas of India. The survey did not need to be translated into Punjabi or Hindi for the Indian participants since all the commerce students can read, write, and speak English. The instruction sheet indicated that participants could contact the researchers by telephone and/or email regarding any questions or concerns they might have about the research.

An exhaustive list of commerce colleges and universities in the Punjab and Delhi areas of India was created to enable trained volunteers to contact, screen, and invite qualified commerce students to participate. Survey questionnaire bundles coupled with an instruction sheet were provided to participating volunteers for distribution.

Approximately 1,100 surveys were distributed and 327 surveys were returned, 20 of which were not usable, for an overall response rate of roughly 30%.

4. Study Procedures

4.1 Confidentiality

Participants were assured that their names would not be disclosed and that confidentiality would be strictly maintained. In addition, participants were explicitly asked not to disclose their names on the questionnaire, and were free to decline responding to any survey question that they felt might reveal their identity.

A Student Consent Letter specifically indicated that by completing the survey, subjects have consented to participate in the study. Any information that will be obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with subjects will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with subjects' permission or as required by law.

5. Results

5.1 Data Analysis Methods

Measures of central tendency, variance, skewness, and kurtosis were calculated on responses to all of the items. Skewness measures for all of the items were within the range of: -0.856 to -1.305, which is considered to be an

excellent range for most research that requires using statistics appropriate to normal distributions. Therefore, we used statistics that assume scalar values and symmetric distributions to test our hypothesis.

Using a principle component rotation and a varimax rotation, we ran a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) on the eleven items. Three factors explained 92.94% of the variance in the eleven items (see Table 1), and all of the items were loaded on the expected factors (see Table 2).

Table 1: Total Variance Explained – Rotation Sums of Square Loadings.

Total Variance Explained			
	Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.682	33.476	33.476
2	3.670	33.367	66.843
3	2.871	26.101	92.944

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Table 2: Rotated Component Matrix.

	Component		
	1	2	3
My immediate instructor...:			
TL1) ...makes me proud to be associated with him or her.	**0.942**	0.129	0.157
TL2) ...encourages me to study.	**0.942**	0.138	0.188
TL3) ...transmits a "sense of mission" to me.	**0.931**	0.150	0.172
TL4) ...lets me use my intelligence to overcome obstacles in the classroom and outside the classroom.	**0.926**	0.140	0.171
My immediate instructor...:			
SE1) ...permits me to use my own intelligence to solve study problems.	0.133	**0.942**	0.129
SE2) ...encourages me to handle my study problems.	0.162	**0.935**	0.145
SE3) ...trusts my intelligence.	0.135	**0.946**	0.081
SE4) ...allows me freedom in my study.	0.112	**0.941**	0.099
SPAP1) I am able to use my study skills effectively to learn course material.	0.187	0.128	**0.946**
SPAP2) I am being successful to learn course material.	0.192	0.118	**0.957**
SPAP3) Overall, I am successful to accomplish in developing many valuable skills.	0.197	0.137	**0.943**

Notes: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis
         Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization
         a. Rotation converged in 4 iterations

Cronbach Alpha on the above indicated clusters of items: Transformational Leadership 0.9721; Empowerment 0.9699; and Student perceived academic performance 0.9752.

The question subsets were analyzed in order to enable the calculation of the weighted factor scores. In terms of these weighted factor score items: four transformational leadership, four empowerment, and three student perceived academic performance, loaded approximately equally.

Table 3 provides the Pearson correlation for the variables that we used in the regression model. We found that the student perceived academic performance is positively correlated with transformational leadership used by instructors/professors and empowerment. The positive correlations indicate that transformational leadership used

by instructors/professors and empowerment improves the perceived academic performance of the Indian undergraduate commerce students.

Table 3: Pearson Bivariate Correlation Analysis.

	SPAP	TL	SE
SPAP	1	0.384**	0.272**
TL		1	0.301**
SE			1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
TL = Transformational Leadership
SE = Student Empowerment
SPAP = Student Perceived Academic Performance

6. Testing of Hypotheses

6.1 The Relations of Transformational Leadership and Empowerment with Student Perceived Academic Performance

Positive relationships between i) TL and SPAP and ii) SE and SPAP (see Table 4) were found; that is, the improvement in the degree of perceived academic performance of Indian undergraduate commerce students is related to the improvement in the degree of perceived transformational leadership used by instructors/professors and empowerment.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients [a, b, c].

R^2 = 0.174; SEE = 0.912; F = 32.05; ANOVA's Test = 0.000 Regression Equation: SPAP = -9.357 + 0.332 TL + 0.171 SE					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients [c]	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-9.357	0.052		0.000	1.000
TL	0.332	0.055	0.332	6.079	0.000
SE	0.171	0.055	0.171	3.134	0.002

[a] Dependent Variable: SPAP
[b] Independent Variable: TL and SE
[c] Linear Regression through the Origin

Note that around 17.40% (R^2 = 0.174) of the variance in the degree of Indian undergraduate student perceived academic performance can be explained by the degree of transformational leadership used by instructors/professors and empowerment.

7. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to determine whether the improvement in the degree of transformational leadership used by Indian instructors/professors and empowerment improve the degree of perceived academic performance of Indian undergraduate commerce students. This was done by surveying a sample of undergraduate commerce students from India. These undergraduate commerce student perceptions and judgments are the basis of our findings that the degree of perceived student academic performance is associated with the improvement in the degree of transformational leadership used by the instructors/professors and empowerment. The findings of

this paper support the finding of Ross and Gray [9] in which they explain that transformational leadership improves the student achievement. In addition, the results support the studies of Gondal and Khan [10] and Abbas and Yaqoob [11] in which they found positive relationships between empowerment and employee performance.

Students play a boundary-spanning role where they interact with many individuals from inside (fellow students, administrative staff, and instructors/professors) and outside (employers) their college/university [17]. This large role set requires students to satisfy frequently variegated needs and expectations of multiple parties (only one of which is their instructor/professor), which lowers the student perceived academic performance. Poor student academic performance leads to high student turnover which is not in the favor of educational institutions. Therefore, it is important for Indian colleges/universities to improve student perceived academic performance, which in turn, improves student retention of Indian commerce students. The improvement in student retention will enhance revenues and consequently, the bottom line of the Indian educational institutions. Since transformational leadership used by instructors/professors and empowerment improve the student perceived academic performance, it important to implement them in the educational institutions.

7.1 Implementation of Transformational Leadership Approaches

Although transformational leadership enhances the students' perceived academic performance, there are some barriers that can make it difficult to implement transformational leadership approaches (e.g., lack of student's understanding of the course goals and objectives, communication barriers, lack of time, cultural barriers, instructors' understanding the degree to which transformational leadership needs to be implemented, etc.) [17, p. 7].

To overcome with these challenges described above, instructors need to communicate the course goals and objectives to students by "breaking-them-down" for each individual student. They should foster upward as well as downward communication. Practicing effective listening skills (e.g., showing students that you want to listen, being patient, holding your temper, going easy on argument and criticism, and asking relevant questions) can go a long way toward demonstrating respect and concern for students' personal feelings as well as overcoming communication and cultural barriers. Ultimately, instructors/professors should act as mentors (e.g., educate, advise, coach, support, and encourage) to students to fully overcome "the degree to which transformational leadership needs to be implemented" barriers [17, p. 7, 8].

All of the above require instructors/professors to internalize the importance of showing genuine concern and respect for students and their learning styles. In practice, although it may be difficult for some instructors/professors to increase their use of these transformational leadership behaviors and some students may eye a change in teaching styles with skepticism, the potential benefits far outweigh the costs, and such behaviors are develop-able. The importance of such a leadership development process, however, must be championed and strongly supported by senior leadership (e.g., the Dean) [17, p. 8].

7.2 Implementation of Empowerment Approaches

Empowerment is a bottom-up process rather than something that can be formulated as a top-down strategy. It is highly recommended that instructors/professors implement transformational leadership before empowering students because it will clarify the educational mission, goals, and objectives. In addition, universities/colleges must train instructors/professors, clarify the responsibilities, and provide clear direction to the empowered employees. It is also important to find student desire for empowerment before empowering them. Instructors/professors should learn to trust students, provide frequent feedback, and make students feel recognized for empowered behavior.

7.3 Limitations and Practical Implications

The present study asks for responses from fixed format, set-questions survey tools, which could direct questions to the exclusion of providing additional input. A mail/drop off survey data collection method contributed to a low

response rate or response error. Some favorable techniques such as including postage-paid mail, sending a cover letter, providing a deadline for returning the survey, and promising anonymity were applied in order to increase the response rate. Maturation of participants can also affect the survey response rate. Maturation of participants, in the context of this research, means that some of the research participants may be on holidays. However, a short study period (four weeks) limited any negative effects from maturation.

The practical implications of this study are if Indian commerce students perceive that their instructors/professors are using high level transformational leadership, their academic performance is perceived as higher level than if it is perceived as being used at lower level; if Indian students perceive that they are empowered at higher level, their academic performance is perceived as higher level than if it is perceived as being used at lower level.

7.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Although, this study clearly shows that transformational leadership used by instructors/professors and empowerment improve student perceived academic performance, additional research issues and questions must be addressed. The additional variables that should be researched include:
- The degree to which instructors/professors understand the consequences of empowerment,
- The degree to which instructors/professors understand the perceived academic performance of their students,
- The degree to which instructors/professors understand the desire of their students to be empowered, and
- The degree to which instructors/professors understand the consequences of transformational leadership.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions

AG developed the framework, carried out the final estimations and statistical analysis, and drafted the manuscript. HM and SB collected data. AC and NM double checked methodology and edited the final draft.

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