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# The Influence of Teachers' Perceived Leadership Styles and Students' Learning Approaches on Academic Achievement

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**Abstract:** *The aim of the present study was to analyze the influence of teachers' perceived leadership styles (transformational/ transactional) and students' learning approaches (deep/ surface) on academic achievement in Romanian language and Math, measured by both final grades and baccalaureate simulation grades. 243 students in 11th and 12th grade participated in our study. Results showed that, regardless the study field, academic achievement was positively influenced by the deep learning approach, and negatively by the surface learning approach. Our participants perceived their teachers being more transactional than transformational in their leadership style. Results also showed that the relation between the teachers' perceived leadership styles and their students' achievement depends on the study field, the correlation being significant and positive only in Math. Regression analyses revealed that the predictive power of the two leadership styles depends on how students' academic performance is measured. The implications and limitations of the present study are discussed.*

**Key-words:** *leadership styles, learning approaches, academic achievement*

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## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Learning leads to performance but not all performance is a learning outcome as learning is not always reflected in an observable performance. Learning and achievement are intrinsically linked. On one side, understanding learning mechanisms enhances academic achievement and, on the other side, the increased efficiency of the latter generates and maintains a stimulating psychological state during the learning process itself.

A vast body of research regarding academic performance focuses on both the individual and contextual determinants of adolescents' academic achievement (Gherasim, & Butnaru, 2013). Obviously, one such contextual determinant is the teacher and its personal

and educational characteristics, students' progress being greater and faster when working with well-trained teachers (Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2000). Studies show that teachers' support is a crucial factor influencing middle-school students' achievement by directly guiding the learning activities through the teaching strategies used, by stimulating students' learning motivation and by influencing students' behavior through the explicitly established conduct rules (Shuel, 1996; Vermunt, & Verloop, 1999). Both the teachers' emotional academic support (encouragement, trust) and their instrumental support (guidance or help in solving various learning tasks) have positive significant influences on young students' academic results (Chen, 2005, 2008; Eccles, & Roeser, 2011).

Of main interest in our research presented here is one of the teacher's characteristics that influence both students' behaviors and their approach and engagement in academic tasks, namely his/ her leadership style. According to *the transformational-transactional leadership paradigm*, leaders (teachers) may employ two distinct types of behavioral components when trying to influence their subordinates (students). Although not seen as opposite approaches on task management, these two styles have a different influence on subordinates' motivation and performance (Bass, & Riggio, 2006). Although these styles were originally proposed referring at organizational leaders, there are enough parallels with instruction leadership that turn these leadership theories also applicable to educational settings (cf. Harrison, 2011). Both organizational leaders and teachers coordinate the activities of a group by communication and control, and also having a superior status through power and expertise. Their efficacy is ultimately evaluated the same by the way they manage group dynamics and by their subordinates' and students', respectively, outcomes and involvement.

*The transformational leadership* implies four components: intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, idealized influence (charisma), and inspirational motivation. When employing this leadership style, members feel trust, admiration, loyalty and respect towards their leader, being also motivated to achieve more than they themselves initially expected. This type of leaders transforms and motivates their subordinates by increasing their awareness regarding the importance of task results and also their innovative thinking. On the other hand, *the transactional leadership style* (cf. Bolkan, & Goodboy, 2009) implies an exchanging process which may enhance subordinates' conformism with their leader's requests, without necessarily generating enthusiasm and engagement related to the task objectives. Transactional leaders have an instrumental, task-oriented approach, extrinsically conditioning their subordinates by using rewards for stimulating their good outcomes and criticism for preventing their poor performance (cf. Harrison, 2011). This leadership style emphasizes the transaction or exchange taking place among leaders, subordinates and colleagues. This transaction implies that the leader together with his subordinates establish what is important or necessary, as well as both conditions and rewards for task accomplishment. Though a transformational leadership style stimulates subordinates' motivation and performance more than the transactional style, efficient leaders were found to actually use a combination of the two, with the former style being seen, in certain aspects, as an extension of the latter.

Most of the research regarding the educational implications of this leadership paradigm focuses on either the school managers' leadership styles, especially the transformational one, and their effects on various educational or institutional variables (Kirby,

Paradise, & King, 1992; Marks, & Printy, 2003; Eyal, & Roth, 2011; Cemaloglu, 2011) or on teachers' transformational leadership style and its effect on students' learning and academic achievement (Koh, Steers, & Terborg, 1995; Harvey, Royal, & Stout, 2003; Tsai, & Lin, 2012). For example, Cemaloglu (2011) found that increasing the level of school principals' transformational leadership behaviors leads to higher levels of organizational health and lower levels of school aggression. In another study, Tsai & Liu (2012) found moderate positive correlations between teacher's transformational leadership style and students' engagement and satisfaction which, in turn, influence their evaluations on the quality of teaching. Harvey et al. (2003) and Pounder (2008a) also showed that the teacher's ability to intellectually stimulate their university students significantly correlate with their engagement and global evaluation on teacher's efficacy. Also teacher's charisma and individualized consideration of his/ her students positively influence their engagement in learning and academic tasks. Furthermore, a transformational instructor respectfully interacts with students, promoting continuous change/development in light of new understandings and participative decision-making.

Another major focus in educational research is on learning approaches and their relation with academic achievement. Following their study on how students perceive and then learn a special reading task, Marton & Säljö (1976) emphasized the importance of students' learning approach, an idea which later generated a strong conceptual framework generally known as *student approach to learning* (SAL; Entwistle & Waterston, 1988; Biggs, 1987; Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001). Within this framework, students' learning strategy depends on several factors like students' motivation and goals, their perceptions of the learning task, of the teaching and evaluation methods used and of the classroom climate. Biggs et al. (2001) distinguish between students' *deep learning approach* and the *surface learning approach*, each being differently associated various goals, selective retention, meaning seeking and time and space management. When deploying a deep approach, students show intrinsic motivation and try to use strategies for maximizing the meaning and inner logic, while a surface approach reflects fear of failure, memorizing or mechanical learning and narrow objectives.

Biggs (1987) sees the student's approach to learning as a composite of a motive and an appropriate strategy. Students who only want to get by or just pass an exam with a minimal effort are more likely to memorize only the main elements and rote learn them, whereas students intrinsically motivated are focused on widely exploring the subject, meaningfully linking prior and new information. Students with high achievement motivation pay great attention to their grades so they are more likely to be pragmatic and organized in their approach, seeking a good adjustment to the evaluation criteria. But these approaches and their subsequent strategies are linked not only with students' motivation, but also with the teacher's demands and evaluation techniques. Therefore it would be inappropriate to label one student as being a deep or surface learner, as the very evaluation criteria used by his/her teacher might emphasize or trigger either of the two approaches. For example, if teachers require an exact reproduction of their words without allowing the student to debate or personalize the ideas, the student, in order to meet these requirements, will most probably engage in a surface learning approach.

The purpose of quality teaching should be therefore precisely that of enhancing students' use of a deep learning approach together with discouraging their surface approach

on learning/academic tasks. In this perspective, the way learning is approached actually describes the nature of the relationship among student, task and academic context (with the teacher seen as a contextual factor). Both teacher and student are responsible for the learning outcome, with the teacher structuring and guiding the learning activities and the student engaging in these tasks.

## **2. THE PRESENT STUDY**

Official reports of the Romanian Ministry of Education showed that, in 2013, almost 50% of the high school students couldn't pass the baccalaureate exam and get the diploma, thus missing the opportunity to continue their studies and limiting their employment. The baccalaureate results were poor and very poor especially in the two most important fields, namely Romanian language and literature and Math. Obviously, the immediate question raised after reading these reports is how this poor performance can be explained and which the most relevant determinants of students' academic achievement are.

In this light, the main objective of this present research was to contribute to the need of better understanding the variables influencing the educational processes leading to academic achievement. How the students understand and approach their learning tasks proved to be crucial for their academic performance (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Biggs, 1987; Biggs et al., 2001; Gijbels et al., 2005; Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006). How teachers' approach their students and how they use different teaching and evaluation strategies also proved to significantly influence their students' academic achievement (Harvey et al., 2003; Bass, & Riggio, 2006; Pounder, 2008; Bolkan, & Goodboy, 2009). Given the scientific results presented in the previous theoretical section, our study focused both on teachers' transformational/transactional leadership styles and on students' deep/ surface learning approaches and their relation to students' academic achievement in Romanian and Math, respectively. The main hypotheses of this study were: 1. students' performance is positively correlated with the deep learning approach, and negatively with the surface learning approach; 2. teachers' both transformational and transactional leadership styles positively and significantly correlate with students' academic achievement; 3. both students' learning approaches and teachers' leadership styles are significant predictors for students' academic performance.

## **3. METHOD**

### ***3.1. Participants and procedure***

Participants in this study were 243 students in 11th and 12th grade, 59.7% males (145) and 40.3% females (98), with ages ranging from 16 to 19 ( $M = 17.71$ ,  $SD = .82$ ). Participation in the research project was entirely voluntary and anonymous. All measures, except for the final grades and baccalaureate simulation grades, were made in paper-and-pencil format with instructions given in writing. The student participants completed the questionnaires in group format in classroom settings, the instruments being handed in by the researcher. All participants were given the same information about the aim of the study and instructions about how to complete the measures. The participants were also informed that

their consent was needed, that they could decline to participate at any time, that all collected data would be handled confidentially and that no single person would be identifiable in reports on the findings. They first completed MLQ for one teacher (i.e., Romanian language teacher or Math teacher), continuing with R-LPQ-2F and finally, with MLQ for the other teacher (i.e., Math teacher or Romanian language teacher).

### ***3.2. Measures***

The instrument used for assessing the perceived teachers' transformational and transactional leadership styles was a 24-item measure adapted from Bass and Avolio's (1990; cf. Tepper & Percy, 1994) Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). A 5-point Likert-type scale was used to take respondents' answers ranging from 1 representing "not at all" to 5 representing "frequently if not always". Participants completed the instruments with reference to their Romanian language and Math teacher, respectively.

Revised Learning Process Questionnaire (R-LPQ-2F; Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001). This 20-item questionnaire was used to assess two main approaches to learning: a deep approach and a surface approach. The answer format was a five-point scale rating from 1 (this item is never or only rarely true for me) to 5 (this item is always or almost always true for me).

For the both measures, the authors used the process of back translation. The English version was translated into Romanian by two persons. Persons fluent in both English and Romanian carried out all of the translations. Finally, both versions were compared to find lack of correspondence.

Students' academic performance in Romanian language and Math was measured both by their final semestrial grades communicated by their form master teacher, and by their baccalaureate simulation grades as, in Romania, they are made public in official documents.

## **4. RESULTS**

### ***4.1. Statistics***

All the statistical analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 for Windows. Cronbach's alphas were computed to estimate the internal consistency of all instruments used. Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were calculated for the continuous variables and independent samples t-test was used to compare means between genders. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test bivariate associations between variables in the study. Paired samples t-test was used to compare means of transactional and transformational leadership styles. Hierarchical multiple regression were used to evaluate the association between the predictor variable study process and leadership styles and the criterion variables of performance.

### ***4.2. Correlations between Students' Learning Approaches, Teacher's Leadership Styles and Performance***

Results (Table 1) show significant and positive correlation between deep approach and performance and significant and negative correlation between surface approach and performance, for both Romanian language and Math. Correlations between Romanian language teachers' leadership styles and performance were not significant, but there exist significant and positive correlations between Math teachers' leadership styles (for both transformational and transactional styles) and Math performance.

*Table 1: Alpha Cronbach and correlations between study processes, teacher's leadership styles and performance*

Variables	Alfa Cronbach	Romanian language final grade	Math final grade	Romanian language simulation grade	Math simulation grade
Deep Approach	.781	.251**	.237**	.251**	.231**
Surface Approach	.642	-.150*	-.184**	-.168**	-.209**
Transformational style of Romanian language teachers	.859	ns.		ns.	
Transactional style of Romanian language teachers	.729	ns.		ns.	
Transformational style of Math teachers	.902		.408**		.340**
Transactional style of Math teachers	.766		.366**		.270**

Note: \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$

### 4.3. Gender Differences on Learning Approaches

As show in Table 2 male students had a significantly higher mean score on surface approach, thus reporting to use this study process more than their female peers. There are no significant gender differences regarding deep approach. As show in Table 3, both in Romanian language and Math teachers, transactional style was perceived to be higher than transformational style.

*Table 2: Gender differences on learning approaches*

	Total (SD) (N = 243)	Boys (SD) (N = 98)	Girls (SD) (N = 145)	t-Value
Deep Approach	3.09	.66	3.04	.55
Surface Approach	2.79	.57	2.90	.51

Note: \*\*  $p \leq .01$

*Table 3: Paired sample t-test results for comparing teachers' transformational and transactional styles*

Transformational style (SD) (N = 243)	Transactional style (SD) (N	t-Value
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			=243)		
Romanian language teachers	2.73	.75	3.05	.64	9.612**
Math teachers	3.02	.85	3.15	.64	3.782**
Note: ** $p \leq .0$					

#### 4.4. Hierarchical Linear Regression

The relationships of the independent variables with performance were analyzed using a two-step hierarchical linear regression. The first step included learning approaches and the measures of leadership styles were entered on the second step to determine whether they contribute significantly in explaining students' performance. Because leadership styles did not correlate significantly with Romanian language performance, they were not included in step two for Romanian language performance.

For Romanian language grades criterion, the regression model with learning approaches process explained 11.2 % of total variance (Table 4). The standardized regression coefficient (beta weight) for deep approach was .309 ( $p \leq .01$ ) and for surface approach was  $-.228$  ( $p \leq .01$ ). Thus, students with high deep approach and low surface approach had higher Romanian language grades. For Romanian language baccalaureate simulation criterion, regression model explained 12 % of total variance. The standardized regression coefficient for deep approach was .313 ( $p \leq .01$ ) and for surface approach was  $-.247$  ( $p \leq .01$ ). Thus, students with high deep approach and low surface approach also had higher grades in Romanian language baccalaureate simulation.

For Math grades, the first model with study processes explained 12 % of total variance. Model two with leadership styles explained an additional 10.6 % of the variance in Math grades for a total  $R^2 = 22.5$  %. The standardized regression coefficient in model two for deep approach was .175 ( $p \leq .01$ ), for surface approach was  $-.216$  ( $p \leq .01$ ), for transformational leadership style was .226 ( $p \leq .05$ ) and for transactional leadership style was non-significant. Thus, students with high deep approach, low surface approach and reporting high transformational style for Math teachers had high Math grades.

For Math baccalaureate simulation criterion, the first model with learning approaches explained 13 % of total variance. Model two with leadership styles explained an additional 6.6 % of the variance in Math grades for a total  $R^2 = 19.6$  %. The standardized regression coefficient in model two for deep approach was .206 ( $p \leq .01$ ), for surface approach was  $-.254$  ( $p \leq .01$ ), for transactional leadership style was .158 ( $p \leq .01$ ) and for transformational leadership style was non-significant. Thus, students with high deep approach, low surface approach and reporting high transactional style for Math teachers had high grades in Math baccalaureate simulation.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In trying to better understand our high school students' rather poor results in baccalaureate simulation, our present study focused both on teachers' transformational/transactional leadership styles and on students' deep/ surface learning approaches, with both



characteristics being strongly related to each other and also intrinsically linked to students' performance. As predicted, both measures of students' academic performance (i.e. final grades and baccalaureate simulation grades) in Romanian language and Math correlated significantly and positively with the deep learning approach, and negatively with the surface learning approach. These results are in line with those also mentioned by previous research (e.g. Biggs, 1987; Biggs et al., 2001). Heikkilä and Lonka (2006) also found in their study that students' GPA scores correlate positively with a deep learning approach, and negatively with a surface approach. Therefore our findings emphasize once more the idea that when using a deep approach students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, trying to link in a meaningful way the prior knowledge with the new one, thus maximizing their cognitive efforts and better retaining the learning materials. On the other hand, surface learning is used when students just want to get by minimal requirements with little exploration and cognitive effort, thus memorizing the material for a shorter term related to an evaluation task or a written exam. Moreover, male students in our sample reported to engage significantly more in surface learning than their female peers, while no

Table 4: Hierarchical regression results for the effect of study process and leadership styles on performance

	Romanian language grades			Romanian language bacalaureate simulation			Math grades			Math bacalaureate simulation		
	$\Delta R^2$	F	Beta	$\Delta R^2$	F	Beta	$\Delta R^2$	F	Beta	$\Delta R^2$	F	Beta
Step 1	.112	15.08		.120	16.37		.120	16.29		.130	17.86	
Deep Approach			.309**			.313**			.303**			.303**
Surface Approach			-.228**			-.247**			-.260**			-.286**
Step 2							.106	16.21		.066	9.79	
Deep Approach									.175**			.206**
Surface Approach									-.216**			-.254**
Transformational style									.226*			.133
Transactional style									.142			.158***
R <sup>2</sup>	.112			.120			.225			.196		

Note: \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p = 0.045$  (one-tailed)

gender differences were found on the deep learning approach. Similar gender differences were also reported by other studies (e.g. Biggs, 1987; Gijbels et al., 2005) with male students scoring significantly higher than female students on surface approach to learning. One possible explanation could be that, in their general approach to learning tasks, boys appear to be more motivated by performance-avoidance goals than by mastery goals or performance-approach goals (Gherasim & Butnaru, 2013), thus being more focused on avoiding failure than on the need for success.

According to different scholars (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Harrison, 2011) both transformational and transactional leadership styles are used by efficient leaders, with the former being an extension of the second one. Based on this idea, the second hypothesis of our present research stipulated that teachers' both transformational and transactional leadership styles positively and significantly correlate with their students' academic achievement in Romanian language and Math, respectively. Our results only partially supported this hypothesis, the predicted correlations being significant only for the Math teachers. One possible explanation for the lack of significant correlations between Romanian language teachers' leadership style and their students' performance could be that, attending a technical college, students in our sample might perceive the humanistic fields as being less important than Math, thus paying less attention to or be less influenced by the leadership styles of the Romanian language teachers.

Corroborating these two sets of results we now turn to our third hypothesis according to which both learning approaches and teachers' leadership styles were expected to be significant predictors for students' performance. Again our hypothesis was only partially supported by our data. First, students' academic performance in Romanian language was significantly predicted only by their learning approaches, meaning that good grades are predicted by high deep learning approach and low surface learning, with no significant influence of their teacher's leadership style. Secondly, regression models regarding students' performance in Math were slightly different depending on the two operationalizations of the criterion variable. When predicting the final Math grade, the significant predictors were deep and surface learning approaches and the teacher's transformational leadership style, whereas students' Math grade in baccalaureate simulation was significantly predicted by the same two learning approaches and the transactional leadership style. As opposed to Romanian language, Math is probably perceived by our participants as being an important field of study directly linked to their college profile and their future professional orientations. Additionally, Math tends to be generally seen as a more rigorous and demanding field, not so easily accessible. Therefore teachers are perceived as having a significant (if not decisive) role in how students approach and understand this highly abstract and cognitively challenging, yet very logical, field of study, their teacher's leadership style (also including elements related to their teaching methods and evaluation and motivational strategies) being a significant predictor of their academic achievement.

As for the difference mentioned in the two regression models related to Math performance, it could be grounded in the different types of evaluation process and outcome implied by the two dependent measures. Usually, the final grade at the end of a semester or academic year is more "qualitative", being a product of a wider range of various, and continuous evaluations including not only written tests, but also reflecting students'

homework quality, their involvement in various projects or contextual learning/ creative tasks. The baccalaureate simulation grade, on the other hand, is more “quantitative”, being a very strict, formal and contextual evaluation, emphasizing students’ cognitive ability to meet the requirements and being somehow voided of more subjective elements like students’ involvement, curiosity and exploration. Without disregarding or diminishing the usually strong relation between the two measures, we simply try to say that the different focus of the teachers’ transformational and transactional leadership styles, respectively, might explain the differences in their predictive power revealed by our results. The component behaviors of the transformational style focusing on exploration, elaboration, and stimulation might have a more formative, long-term impact on students’ motivation and performance, being a significant predictor for their final grades. A transactional leadership style usually implies a more pragmatic or instrumental perspective on learning, therefore being more task-oriented in the sense that students should be prepared to face and pass specific evaluations, with clear contents, requirements and criteria, thus becoming a more significant predictor for the baccalaureate simulation grades.

Another finding in our present research was that our participants perceived both their Romanian language and Math teachers as having a more transactional than transformational leadership style. Although in the leadership literature effective leaders are perceived to be those who display more active and engaging (transformational), and less passive (transactional) behaviors, most leaders are likely to range over this transactional-transformational continuum (cf. Pounder, 2008b). One possible explanation for the perceived prevalence of transactional components in teachers’ leadership styles assessed in our study could be the average or below-average achievement level of the students in our sample. Their grades both in Romanian language and Math are quite small, meaning that their achievement or proficiency levels are rather low. Usually, a technical college is not seen as an elite high school, with high achievers and great expectations, therefore students’ performance and motivation are rather poor. These lower expectations and outcomes might, in turn, negatively influence teachers’ expectations and involvement, leading to an either more laissez-faire attitude, or to a more authoritarian behavior, both of them enhancing more transactional than transformational elements. When students’ performance level is rather low, teachers’ are more pragmatically task-oriented, in the sense that their main purpose might be to meet the formal basic requirements and to teach their students as to be at least prepared for their main formal evaluation moments. Of course, one might argue that another way of looking at this finding is that the assessment of the teachers’ leadership style might be subjectively influenced by the very performance level and self-efficacy of their students. In the light of Weiner’s attribution theory (cf. Sălăvăstru, 2004), when a student fails or has poor grades, he/ she might infer an external stable causality, thinking that his/ her current situation is due to his/ her teacher’s attitude and strategies. Both these alternative explanations are, in fact, intrinsically linked, and it is extremely difficult to clearly specify which the cause is and which the effect.

In summary, results of the present study reinforce the idea of significant correlations between students’ learning approaches and their academic performance, with the emphasis on the positive influence of the deep learning approach. Our data also contributes to better understanding the relation between the teachers’ perceived transactional-transformational leadership styles and their students’ learning outcomes, by drawing attention to the fact that

the predictive power of these styles is sensitive to some specific elements like the field study and performance measures. Although teachers in our study were perceived to engage in more transactional than transformational behaviors, the influence of the former is significant only in relation with the baccalaureate simulation grades, while the latter reflects better in the long-term evaluations. Therefore, teachers should be specifically trained and made aware of these implications, in the sense that they should shift from a transactional style focused on strict preparation for formal tests to a more transformational style focused also on epistemic curiosity, cognitive exploration and in-depth understanding of the learning materials.

Possible extensions of future research can be drawn from the very limitations of the present research. Specifically, further studies should involve a larger and more heterogeneous student sample, covering a larger range of high schools types, with students of different achievement levels and goals, with the academic performance measured in other possible ways. Additionally, further analyses of the correlations hypothesized in our study should also concern various fields of study, either directly or only indirectly linked to students' specialized profile, either required or not within formal exams like the baccalaureate.

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