

Beyond the Touchline: Leadership Lessons from Elite Football for Educational Excellence

Bogdan COSTACHE*

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

**Corresponding author, bogdan.costa@gmail.com*

Vladimir Aurelian ENACHESCU

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

vladimir.enachescu@dppd.ase.ro

Andreea GHEORGHITA

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

gheorghitaandreea23@stud.ase.ro

Abstract. *Over the last decade, leadership research has been focused on challenges faced by high-performance organizations to ensure their sustainability when facing complexity, uncertainty or amplifying scrutiny. Elite football is one of the most observed performance oriented organization systems, where high-level competition together with time pressure, dispersed domain specific expertise and accountability mechanisms are highly visible. This study examines the translatability from elite football leadership principles to educational institutions not only as metaphorical comparisons, but rather structurally similar and demonstrably performance-based organizations. It has been situated at the intersection of literature on leadership, elite sports performance and educational management, drawing on insights from a diachronic and comparative reading of models of leadership in elite football specially transformational leadership, distributed leadership and high-performance culture. Our analysis identifies core leadership dimensions like and maps these systematically to educational leadership practices including decision making under sustained pressure, team cohesion, feedback and performance monitoring systems, resilience. Educational institutions can embrace a more coherent performance orientation, the authors contend, without compromising their normative and social missions. We contribute by highlighting a theoretically rooted cross-domain leadership framework but also, more importantly, that the transfer of leadership knowledge (specificities rather than generalities) between elite sport and education has not been systematically researched. Findings provide a foundation for implications related to educational leadership development, institutional governance, and policy design with limitations and future empirical research opportunities. This paper stands out to scholars, practitioners and policymakers engaging with the ways in which organizations can endure amidst continuous and high levels of pressure.*

Keywords: educational leadership; elite football; high-performance organizations; transformational leadership; distributed leadership; organizational resilience.

Introduction

As education is synthesized into a comprehensive discourse on human capital in the 21st century, institutions are challenged to highlight the quantifiable drivers of performance while progressing holistically. School leaders are asked to be pedagogical experts and strategic managers, if not more, as the demands from governments, parents and the labour market increase. High-performance environments beyond education - elite sport in particular - provide valuable parallels in this regard.

DOI: 10.2478/picbe-2026-0037

© 2026 B. Costache; V. A. Enachescu; A. Gheorghita, published by De Gruyter.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

To make it more evident, let me add a few clarifications: we are dealing with organizations that operate at high stakes (thousands or millions of euros per day), performance orientation (their results can be seen weekly and depended on a handful of matches each year), team cohesion and pressure-based adaptability. While at first glance the lack of direct relevance to education is apparent, they provide operational frameworks and leadership behaviors that are germane to school board governance, teacher talent development, and organizational resiliency.

This paper explores how leadership models from elite football can be translated - conceptually and practically - to the education sector.

The study does not seek to romanticize sport or awkwardly transplant performance models. Rather, it seeks to explore:

- What are the parallels between leading elite football and school leadership?
- How can elements of football's performance culture be selectively adapted in educational contexts without compromising core educational values such as equity, student development, and ethical responsibility?
- What are the risks and limitations of such cross-sectoral translation?

The questions here are not, of course, whether elite football is devoid of values or that education should simply adopt performance logic without question. Instead, it approaches the contradiction between intensity of performance and normative commitments, examining how leaders in education can embrace practices that induce more performance whilst preserving the mission of education as a values-based right.

And more important is that elite football clubs have similar challenges to those faced within academic institutions. Both domains are persistent human potential developments, reliant on expert knowledge, and are located within broader social-political and economic systems. Both are accountable to multiple stakeholders (the governing bodies and communities & participants), and both have to grapple with balancing short term performance demands against longer term development imperatives. These shared characteristics suggest that elite football provides an interesting case study for educational leadership, but only when they are viewed through a demanding analytical lens.

However, current sport and education engagement in leadership literature remains mostly superficial with metaphorical language or inspirational narratives rather than systematic comparative analysis. While sport is often noted in the popular discussion of motivational learning, those approaches are relatively theory-light and lacking methodology. This paper deliberately avoids a purely anecdotal or metaphorical view and conceptualises elite football as an organisational field worthy of systematic academic attention with respect to leadership practices.

The overarching aim of this study is to demonstrate how the lessons of leadership from elite football institutions can inform the advancement of educational leadership theory and practice. The paper therefore sets out both domains as performance organisations bound by the same influences of uncertainty with a view to contributing towards a more sophisticated understanding of leadership that is transsectoral. It addresses an identifiable knowledge gap in the literature regarding structured transfer of leadership competence across domains and articulates a call to interdisciplinary research in leadership.

In so doing, the paper pursues three interrelated goals. Its first primary aim is it to critically synthesise the most significant commonalities and divergences between wider leadership models found in elite football, as well as education contexts. Second, it provides the conceptual lens to explain salient dimensions of leadership effective for durable success irrespective of domain. Third,

it explains the implications of these findings for the development of principal preparation programmes, the school-centred governance policy landscape. This makes the paper a theoretical contribution to leadership, well as to the practical dilemma of contemporary educational leaders. The uneasy relationship between normative educational values and performance-led organizational logics remains one of the unresolved tensions in educational leadership research. Despite education being rightly perceived as a moral and socio_cultural practice, this perception renders educators almost tacitly reluctant towards a discourse of performance, especially in relation to competition, measurement and accountability. As a result, leadership theory in education has been inclined to externalize performance pressures as an imposed policy objective, rather than recognize them as living organizational constituted realities.

This resistance, of course, puts educational leaders in a position of theory without practice and very real risks being ill-prepared to lead inside the conditions they are wittingly or unwittingly facing. Despite whether scholars promulgate similar developments across the board, accountability regimes, public ranking systems, parental choice mechanisms and international benchmarking have transformed education into a comparative performance field. To be effective, leaders must be able to make sense of and engage with complexity from the ground up in ways that developmental theory as it is written may not provide.

The nature of leadership in elite football, however, offers a chance to reconnect the analysis of performance with educational leadership theory, without reducing education to instrumental outputs.

Literature Review

Leadership, as both a field of research and practice, has expanded immensely within the last decades, but little has been done to address cross-sectorial synthesis between powerful domains such as elite sport and education. While leadership research in education has achieved an impressive theoretical tradition of excellence in the areas of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership, the (conceptual) innovation emerging from high-performance settings, football at its very best, have not been integrated into professional thinking about educational leaders. By contrast, leadership scholarship in the realm of professional sport has followed discernible cycles whereby narrative individual account is abandoned for systemic, developmental and organizational perspectives revealing scope for comparative scrutiny (Aboul-Dahab, K., 2025).

Empirical work: research has positioned leadership within the lens of organizations much more as an emergent property of organisations, rather than a granted trait of extraordinary individuals. As Young (2020) maintains: 'Elite sport leadership encapsulates the constant exposure to consequence where decision-making happens fast, but is literally and publicly evaluated in an instant.' Exposure of this sort, brings latent leadership behaviours that are clarity, accountability and adaptive learning driven. These features of educational leadership correspond closely to, but far from completely define, conventional conceptions that privilege process over product and stability over adaptation.

Transformational leadership is a prominent nexus of elite football and education. In the context of sport, transformational leadership has been viewed as the ability for leaders to facilitate individual motivation that collectively works toward getting results, particularly when these performance outputs are in plain view. Meyer (2015) points out, leaders at the highest level build

systems of belief that will survive performance pressure over times of comfort. There is no transformation without a demand for accountability and discipline in execution.

Thus viewed, the distributed leadership has made its halting way from being mostly educational scholarship, yet has engaged with football"-related scholarship to divergent degrees. The kind of leadership in professional football is less ideological than functional, one almost necessitated by the collective need to integrate divergent strains of expertise across tactical, physical, medical and mental domains. However, in examining the succession of elite football leadership Bowyer, Groom and Gibson (2025) find that who is appointed becomes more dependent on institutional processes than individuals condensing the concept of leadership as an organisational capability.

Distributed leadership has emerged as one of the most widely accepted on a normative basis, associated with collaboration and sharing decision making among teachers and leaders within their schools (Harris & Spillane, 2008). But opponents say if undistributed without clear responsibility, it leads to symbolic, rather than substantive leadership. Baldi (2021), in her ethnography of football academies, describes them as “dream factories” although the ethos within is one of continuous tension between development and deselection with culture formed by explicit standards and constant feedback. That perspective becomes contradictory in the context of education, where prevailing discussions often consider culture in terms of values and relationships but do not directly engage margins of performance.

You are trained for high-pressure environments in the professional football world. Mighten (2020) therefore theorizes expert leadership of professional football as conditional on specific felicity conditions, namely situational awareness, legitimacy and the ability to act under uncertainty. The phenomenon is not confined to sport; leaders in education also find themselves often locked into a crisis narrative, and amid advancing policy uncertainty and genuine public scepticism. Only areas of procedural uncertainty, such as deliberation in educational leadership research (Spillane, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005), are largely institutionalized as collaboration and shared responsibility. Where these types of approaches do offer important protections regarding equity and professional trust, they cannot emphasize performance intensity, rapid movement decision making processes, and ongoing feedback the same way an elite sport environment will. When combined, these perspectives offer a coherent blend of relational legitimacy and performance oriented clarity to broader understandings of leader fulfilment that complex embedded organizations face exemplified by elite football educational structures.

Also, mentorship and support networks are much bigger drivers - all of which contrast heavily to traditional educational pathways. While educational leadership development professionals know that mentorship is important, it often takes informal and ni-institutionalized forms in schools, reducing mentorship to a less efficacious strategy.

Another major theme within the literature of football leadership relates identity, belonging and common purpose. In contrast, Walker (2017), when he proposes his captain class thesis, dismisses archetypes that rely on charismatic leadership as mere behaviours that buttress fraught groups in challenging times – regulation of emotion and symbolic consistency. The above findings are congruent with the research on identity in organizations, particularly around schools serving either marginalized or high-achieving students. In this context, for example, Al-Hroub (2023) demonstrates the intricate association between learning and educational capital accumulation in supportive leading frameworks conceptually reinforces football ideological integrity hearings.

Some pedagogical aspects of leadership are also demonstrated through research carried out in the field of sports. In the specific context of learning professionalism at touchline Johnson &

Hammond (2018) argue that elite sport settings are informal pedagogical spaces where leadership is effectively a modelling feedback and situated learning process. This idea fits easily with modern conceptualisations of educational leadership as pedagogy, but football scholarship prioritises feel immediacy and embodied processes of learning.

Lastly, leadership transfer across domains is also complicated by wider socio-cultural contexts. Hughes' consideration of football, identity and secular forms of life as shows that leadership practices are so context-bound (and in a cultural and/or political sense) that any advocacy for transfer is hopelessly naïve. The likes of Waddington (2022) and Fieldsend (2017) emphasise that success/failure in European football is based on systemic coherence across development, governance, cultural aspiration; not the neat packaged leadership techniques.

Recent studies reframed the relationship between sport and education, no longer as a solely transferential movement built on practices but as an integrative systemic process. Lin (2025) argued that sport and education are an “organic entity,” living through deep interaction wherein educational outputs lie at the heart of a sport as it is enriched by its pedagogical structuring, with one field encroaching on another.

This perspective has a view of leadership as not merely an area to pass from generation to generation, but co-evolving under an umbrella of performance on some stage.

But this vision of integration is far from being mainstream. Lin argues for an argument for coordination across the training systems in the physical, cognitive, emotional and social dimensions while others caution that settling on coordinating these efforts can drown out distinctions between performance environments and education environments. The implication of this tension is that cross-domain leadership translation requires not simply coherence mechanisms, but filtering processes that retain education's normative core.

Transferability is further addressed in research about professional football academies. Green & Kay (2026) identify a potential set of transferable competencies - interpersonal, adaptable, decision-making and goal-oriented skills gleaned from elite sport development pathways that may be relevant in wider educational and professional contexts. This implies that patterns of leadership in football lie at the centre of capabilities that transcend sport. Yet another tension the authors see is that in some elite academies sport success is prioritised over education engagement, damaging future career prospects for players. In a similar vein, Farias, Hastie and Mesquita (2017) show that sport education models aimed at improving performance can reproduce exclusive or inequitable practices unless overtly mediated pedagogically. These findings bolster the case made by Mitchell et al. (2022) for why interpretations of sport that are valuable for leadership should be intentionally marginalized in educational contexts in order to assure co-alignment with inclusivity and developmentally-driven aims.

Roşca V (2011) What CSR initiatives are English football clubs involved in and what types of businesses offer soccer to the world as a social impact. On the other hand, he specified 7 fields for classifying CSR-activities (charity activity, health, family, cultural, social, sport and education) against CSR purpose. The volume and intensity of the corporate social responsibility activities may depend on whether clubs are wealthy or not, or whether the club has a higher position in society.

The role of performance culture in shaping leadership is also a reflection of that tension, and further expression of it. Eubank et al. Many (2017) point out that mental toughness is a defining characteristic in the cross-domain patterns of leadership demands common to other high-performance domains such as elite sport, business and military context. This view proposes that leadership behaviour in sport may be transferable to other domains, such as education. However,

Eubank et al. (2017) that also highlight an important caveat: performance cultures can foster unethical cultures when they compel you to conform to norms that damage personal well-being or are contrary to your values. This worry was recently echoed by Champ et al. (2020), exemplifying how such high pressure environments (like, football) can potentially subvert optimal and holistic development by displacing well-being above performance maximization in talent. Conversely, educational leadership frameworks (Sergiovanni 1996) establish ethical responsibility and student well-being as foci of practice, emphasizing that the transfer of psychometric conceptualizations of performance-oriented leadership through mechanisms such as system house visits needs to be approached cautiously so these do not work to simply reproduce harmful cultural dynamics across widely varying national contexts.

This is aligned similarly to McGinley (2025), who argues for a multisectoral orientation to education. From this perspective, leadership transcends boundaries of institutions and is presumed to require co-ordination from heterogeneous actors with different priorities and constraints. McGinley also flags structural issues such as asymmetries in power and other resources, complexity in governance, although this may be on brand with emerging models of distributed and ecosystem leadership. These challenges obscure the notion that leadership practices translate easily across sectors. Multisectoral contexts require leaders not to facilitate direct translation of competing logics, but rather to translate across these points or borders, negotiating institutional frontiers and managing tension between performance objectives and social responsibility.

As important as these convergences are, elite football and education leadership literatures continue to exist largely independently within their respective disciplinary silos. In contrast to educational leadership scholarship which has been more concerned with issues of legitimacy, equity and professional trust; sport leadership research is often framed by disciplines such as psychology and sociology that promote abstractions related to performance optimisation, velocity of decision making and competitive advantage. These divergent foci have hindered the development of integrative frameworks which can account for leadership as both a ubiquitous phenomenon across organizational domains.

Both streams of literature are plentiful, yet a clear separation remains between elite football leadership scholarship and educational contexts. Scholars in sport leadership have benefited from an emphasis on performance, expediency and agency while educational leadership literature favors legitimacy, collaboration and ethical accountability. Beyond context, this distinction points toward a deeper theoretical assumption about leader role. However, these perspectives need not be mutually exclusive. Rather, they offer distinct yet complementary perspectives on leadership under different constraints. This paper extends this line of thought through the proposal of a cross-domain synthesis, whereby performance orientation and educational values are not seen as an opposing dichotomy, nor even as competing forces, but rather elements that require nuanced alignment amidst complicated organizational ecosystems.

This literature was selected by using a purposive sampling method, focusing on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and doctoral research that addressed leadership explicitly related to elite sport and education. It was limited to those studies that offered theoretical or empirical insights into leadership at times of performance pressure and in organizational complexity and institutional accountability. The goal of the study is not to provide an extensive overview; rather, the selection enables us to obtain a sample representation of principal theoretical positions that speak to our research questions.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The purpose of the current study does not lie in an empirical evaluation of leadership effectiveness per se, be it in elite football or educational organisations; instead, it is to create a theoretical framework that enables systematic comparisons and conceptual transference across contexts. Therefore, a qualitative comparative conceptual research methodology is employed engaging with an interpretivist epistemological philosophy. This kind of positioning suggests a recognition that leadership is fundamentally a relational and contextual phenomenon whose meaning and purpose arises from organizational culture, institutional norms, practice expectations and critique rather than individual traits alone.

The study is supported by an epistemological stance whereby the significance of qualitative research is rooted in its constructivist nature, that leadership itself cannot exist as a discoverable variable observable across contexts, and, thus, not empirically measurable. Rather, leadership is conceived as dynamic patterns of practices negotiated across specific organizational fields. Accordingly, elite football and education are treated as two distinct but homologous institutional systems with their own logics of performance, legitimacy and professional authority.

From the ontological plane, leadership is understood as relational so that it becomes an emergent property of organizational systems rather than a persistent characteristic held by individuals. The official-style understandings of leadership are reproduced, without abandoning the underlying actor-structure extractions and performance-expectations, on a daily basis through practice.

Methodologically, the article employs analytical abstraction instead of empirical sampling to structure the comparative logic. The corpus of data includes peer-reviewed literature, academic monographs and doctoral research in leadership studies, sports management and educational administration. Such sources are not positivist data to be taken as evidence: rather, they store theoretically respected narratives of practice.

This research is grounded on the premise that elite football and educational institutions fit into the family of performance organisations operating in uncertainty, so this conceptual framework sits upon this assumption. Performance orientation is having clear goals, evaluative processes and rewards or penalties aligned with organizational outcome but not necessarily the same ends (or value systems). In elite football, these discursive mechanisms are at least unmediated in transparency and immediacy of measurement; while in education such mechanisms have to travel through the sieve that is a policy instrument environment (think all those reforms), followed by an assessment regime (we have been testing students for decades now) before they arrive at our doorsteps, repackaged as reputational indicators. But both fields require leaders to unite human capital, institutional strategy and environmental limitations in the pursuit of long-term effectiveness.

At a higher level of analytical abstraction, the conceptual framework developed in this study can be formally expressed through a system of structural relations among latent leadership constructs.

$$\eta_2 = \beta_{21}\eta_1 + \gamma_{21}\xi_3 + \zeta_2\eta_3 = \beta_{31}\eta_1 + \beta_{32}\eta_2 + \zeta_3$$

where:

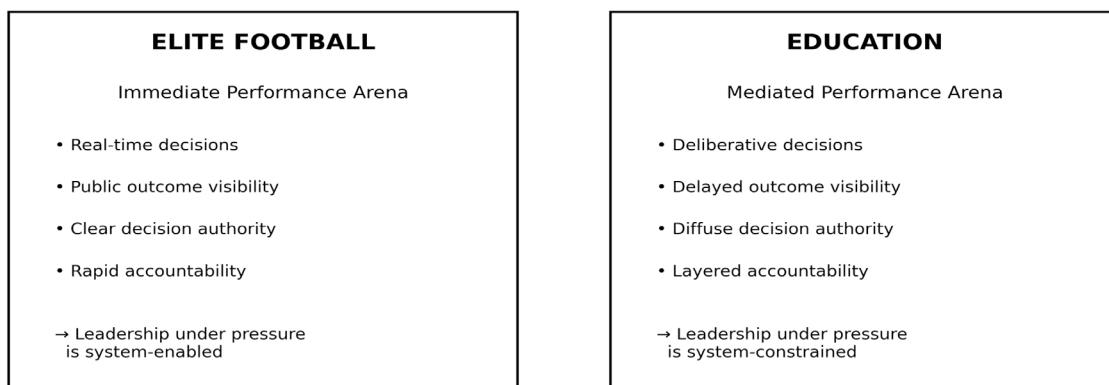
- ξ_1 represents leadership under pressure,
- ξ_2 represents leadership legitimacy,
- ξ_3 represents distributed leadership,
- η_1 denotes performance feedback systems,
- η_2 denotes collective decision coherence,
- η_3 denotes organizational resilience,
- ζ_i denotes contextual disturbance terms.

Leadership is formalized in terms of a system of interdependent latent constructs, not as a collection of isolated management behaviors. These structural relationships have theoretical rationale as directional dependencies in which performance feedback systems are a function of leadership under pressure and legitimacy, while system coherence helps to create organizational resilience. Importantly, the disturbance terms are not viewed as stochastic error in a strict positivist sense similarly to traditional approaches to confounding by unobserved variables but rather as conceptual placeholders for different kinds of institutional, cultural, and contextual contingencies that typify complex organizational environments such as elite football clubs and educational institutions.

Note that this formal expression is not meant for empirical estimation in the current study, but instead aims to show the internal logical consistency and analytical strength of any proposed framework.

Leadership dynamics may be thought of in terms of improving processes over time, though this study does not use formal modeling. Rather, what is emphasized is theoretical coherence and clarity of concepts.

Although no temporal data are inspected in the articles this formulation demonstrates that the framework can easily be applied to longitudinal and systems oriented empirical research.



**Figure 1. Leadership under pressure:
comparative organizational conditions in elite football and education.**

Source: Authors' own research.

Theoretical coherence, internal consistency, and alignment with scholarship enable truthfulness in the theoretical method. That is to say, whereas the goal of the study is not statistical generalizability (which applies to a larger population), it is instead analytical generalizability, providing concepts transcending contexts and that elicit further exploration. Reflexivity is maintained through the obvious awareness of the researcher presence in creating meaning and situating any analysis within established theoretical conversations.

Based on these methodological and theoretical underpinnings, the research presents a contextual basis of systematic theme analysis on salient principles literature about leadership between elite-level sport and extrapolated as possibilities for educational administration. This articulation of these five elements acts as an analytical scaffold, as well a translational bridge: it moves the subsequent discussion from descriptive comparison to theoretically driven interpretation.

To help ground that comparative reasoning in practice, the analysis draws on case illustrations of elite football approaches drawn from high-analysis / coaching models such as Pep Guardiola's positional play ideal model alongside a relational-style leader embodied by Jürgen Klopp and his own high-intensity model. Rather, these cases do not undergo theoretical examination by construction but serve as a starting point on how Leadership under pressure or the role of pressure feedback and coordination collectively is expressed in practice. By adding them, the comparative part of comparisons can take an even recognizable shape as leadership forms.)

Results and discussions

Our main study finding is that of the intersection between elite football leadership and educational leadership across three shared dimensions: resilience, coping strategies and sustained professional stamina. In elite football resilience is not a personal psychological trait, but an imperative for systems of training paradigm feedback loops and collective belief system. In pressure as normal, institutions instate coping strategies; in recovery mechanisms, they structure follow-ups; and in performance evaluation, they normalize acceptance. Endurance, similarly, is the ability to maintain peak functioning for long periods of uncertainty and gaze, not a passive holding pattern. When applied to educational leadership, these insights also imply moving beyond an individualistic conception of resilience toward the creation and maintenance of organizational conditions that support professional capacity. This reframing perceives leadership as not only assistance but as the framework for sustainable performance.

This paper attempts to examine the assimilation of leadership patterns in elite football organizations and their implications for current educational leadership theory and practice when subjected to a hard, analytical examination deprived of metaphor. This study, by positioning elite football as an over-determined performance system in its own right (rather than a source of exhortatory analogy), has attempted to address this challenge, and contribute towards more multidisciplinary understandings of leadership across domains. The analysis shows that elite football and educational institutions are structurally conditioned similarly, even though they have fundamental differences regarding their purpose and normative orientation, hence making cross-domain leadership learning analytically defensible and practically relevant.

One of the other hallmarks that distinguishes elite governing bodies in football are feedback and regulatory systems concerning performance. We are registered in a thrumming web of feedback looping around performance tracking, data generating, the exertion scaling action of

coaching and then after-action review. These increasingly high-frequency learning environments integrate technical data analytics, video analysis and coaching input with peer interaction.

The feedback is continuous, multisource and connected to performance improvements. Feedback acts as a learning backbone which reduces uncertainty and allows for adaptive adjustment instead of just felt like evaluative judgment. In contrast to education, the feedback system also is episodic, outside in, compliance focused and not learning-focused. Leadership in education has long been recognized as a practice for formative improvement, yet many learning organizations live and die by the false duality of feedback and surveillance. Within the football context this demonstrates the relevance of schisming developmental feedback from summative assessment and contextualising feedback in non-occasioned professional practice, rather than assuming a low-frequency event. For us as educators, this means designing organizational structures to ensure feedback is a collective asset and not the individual liability, at all levels in our organizations; consciously building cultures of continuous improvement.

Leadership is not analyzed in a vacuum and the typology discussed is nothing more than an analysis of how leadership focuses on contextual feedback systems, which leaders create, manage, and maintain through designing the structures that generate and use performance information.

One could thus say that a significant underlying tension in leadership transfer across domains has to do with the fact that elite football and education are fueled by logics of aggregate utility which cannot be reconciled (Arthur; Bairner; Rainey). In professional football, success is typically framed in black-and-white terms; win/lose with enormous pressure to maximize short-term results. On the other hand, educational leadership centers on long-term student success, equity and social responsibility. These logics appear to be at a deep level contradictory to each other.

But a deeper look indicates that the tension is not between performance and values; it is between competing definitions of performance. Elite football operates within a very slender performance frame, education operates with at least one additional developmental frame. The challenge for educational leadership, therefore, is not to repudiate performance logic but rather to reframe it in ways that are meaningful to educators. It is not about competitiveness, it is about sustained student growth, effective institutions and equitable outcomes.

That reframing allows application of football leadership principles - clarity of expectations, structures of accountability, high-volume critique - without the flawed adoption of a "Winning (has) at all costs" ethos. On the contrary, these principles can be relabeled as drivers for learning, growth and institutional improvement.

In virtually all leadership discourse on education, resilience is invoked at the level of individual wellbeing centering on survival skills and personal steel. While these strategies are important they often mask the organizational factors that generate distress and vulnerability. When we map these findings from elite football back to the demands of even the most complex organizations, it begins to reveal a new way of thinking about resilience, one that emphasizes institutional design and requires leadership attention on work balancing but also role clarity and adaptive capacity. This takes the burden off of individual actors and instead places it on leadership systems that can withstand disruption while maintaining high performance. This shift from a belief that resilience exists inside the individual and is a collection of personal attributes, to one where it is seen as system oriented has major implications for leadership design which are collated in Figure 2.

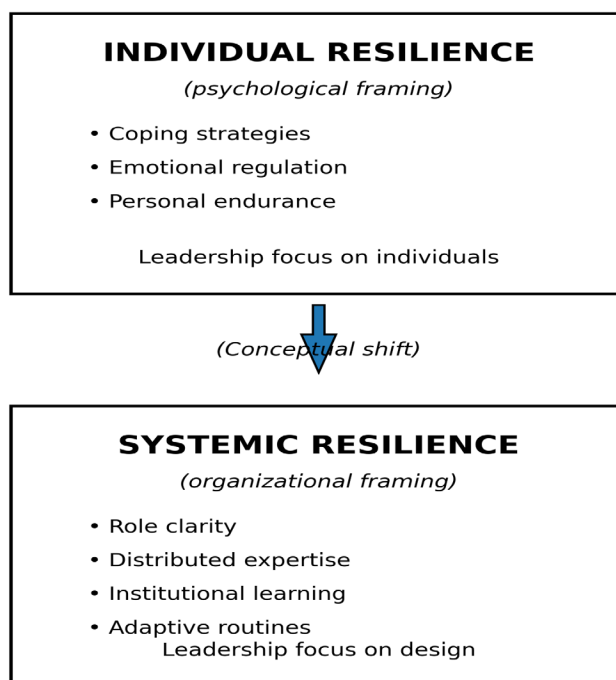


Figure 2. From individual resilience to systemic resilience: leadership design implications

Source: Authors' own research.

Turning that kind of knowledge into practice for educational leaders, may mean operationalising these as feedback loops in an instructional cycle, peer observations or data-informed reflection meetings. Likewise, leadership teams may start to embrace more rigorous role definitions and performance expectations that draw inspiration from the positional clarity associated with football. Among these training elements, but highlighted in work on school leadership development are simulations that provide exposure to high-stakes decisions. Not sacrificing pedagogic integrity, these examples demonstrate how principles from elite football based upon construction can be applied to practice in the real-world.

Conclusion

The primary theoretical contribution represents the articulation of a conceptual framework, as key leadership dimensions exist within extreme performance contexts, which looks at decision-making under duress; team cohesion and role clarity; feedback loops and performance regulation systems; organizational resilience. These dimensions emerged from critical synthesis of the leadership literature in elite football and education, and were examined in terms of their organizational functions rather than contextual expressions. In so doing, this paper makes an important contribution to leadership theory by transitioning away from a sole focus on individual leader traits toward system level leadership practices embedded in organization design, culture and governance.

Practically, this study is part of the educational leadership discourse and offers a selective lens through which leaders/or policymakers might question practices or assumptions. Rather than specifying interventions in pre-determined terms, the framework enables reflection and adaptation partly based on learning from elite football but responsive also to education's distinctive ethical, social and pedagogical commitments. This orientation accounts for a more realistic yet unrelenting

deal with performance pressures, accountability mandates and the ambiguity which increasingly marks the work lives of school leaders.

These limitations suggest various directions for future research. An empirical approach, then, may be to use qualitative case study designs to explore how educational leaders interpret and negotiate models of elite football leadership within their own institutional contexts. Cross-national comparative studies could explore the extent to which performance-oriented leadership approaches are legitimately relevant given the contextual differences in governance structures, accountability regimes and cultural norms (e.g., Gallagher et al., 2022). While a metrics framework could provide an initial structure, alternatively, mixed-methods research integrating organizational performance data and qualitative insights with institutional outcomes in other domains of professional practice might more fully illuminate the broad relationship between leadership design and institutions.

Another fruitful area for research is longitudinal investigation in the areas of leadership development and succession. In relation to the work on elite football's talent pipelines, more specific comparisons could be made (or asked of all) with regard to how educational leadership pathways are both constructed and located; partly, what processes hold them at systemic scale (or not). Above and beyond this, there are probably lessons to be drawn in both areas from voice of academic literature on crisis leadership which would be tremendously helpful when it comes to talks about decision-making, communication and organizational learning.

In a broader sense, this research contributes to an emerging corpus of leadership scholarship that contests compartmentalization by sectors and is grounded in rigorously interdisciplinary theory. This paper demonstrates that elite football comprises an organizational field in its own right, as opposed to a merely metaphorical resource, and the kinds of structurally informed comparisons possible with this treating enable ways in which leadership theory can be enriched. In this world, organizational dilemmas are stratified even more sharply across institutional silos; hence such approaches will become increasingly necessary.

In conclusion, this article argues for and justifies the need to engage with leadership practices that have not been widely considered in educational research (and elsewhere). Despite this, if we view elite football as an organizational system of comparable complexity to education, then it has much to say about the challenges of leadership in our schools today. By moving these dialogues across domains, leadership scholarship can make progress toward more integrative and context-sensitive theories that are able to inform practice in increasingly complex organizational contexts.

Acknowledgments:: During the preparation of this work, the author(s) utilized ChatGPT 4 to enhance readability and language clarity. Following the use of this tool, the author(s) meticulously reviewed and revised the content as necessary and assume(s) full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

This paper is the result of research conducted within the Doctoral School of Management at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Decontare: This paper was co-financed by The Bucharest University of Economic Studies during the PhD program.

References

- Aboul-Dahab, K. (2025). The Psychology of Football Fans: Identity, Loyalty, and the Power of Belonging. Loyalty, and the Power of Belonging (August 11, 2025).
- Baldi, R. (2021). The dream factory: inside the make-or-break world of football's academies. Birlinn Ltd.
- Bowyer, G., Groom, R., & Gibson, L. (2025). Leadership succession: exploring the recruitment process of 1st Team Managers by Sporting Directors in English professional football. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 1-24.
- Champ, F. M., Nesti, M. S., Ronkainen, N. J. (2020). The impact of organizational culture in elite youth football. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 32(5), 1–20.
- Eubank, M. R., Nesti, M. S., (2017). A culturally informed approach to mental toughness development in high performance sport. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*.
- Farias, C., Hastie, P. A., & Mesquita, I. (2017). Towards a more equitable and inclusive learning environment in sport education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 22(4), 460–476.
- Fieldsend, D. (2017). The European game: The secrets of European football success. Birlinn Ltd.
- Green, M., & Kay, A. (2026). The development of transferable skills within professional football academies. *Football Studies*.
- Hughes, A. W. The Touchline of Fair Play: Football, Head Coverings and the Constantly Shifting Secular. THE BEAUTIFUL GAME ON A MUSLIM PITCH
- Johnson, C., & Hammond, L. (2018). Learning professionalism on the touch-line: pedagogical challenges and recommendations. *Athletic Training Education Journal*, 13(3), 290-298.
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2005). Transformational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 41(5), 768–798.
- Lin, S. (2025). Exploration of the educational path of school sports in the context of the integration of sports and education. *Journal of Modern Educational Theory and Practice*.
- McGinley, S. V. (2025). Much the same or radical change? The case for a multisectoral approach to quality physical education. University of British Columbia.
- Meyer, U. (2015). Above the line: Lessons in leadership and life from a championship program. Penguin.
- Mighten, E. (2020). Felicity conditions of a theory of expert leadership in professional football. Sheffield Hallam University (United Kingdom).
- Roşca, V. (2011). Corporate social responsibility in English football: history and present. *Management & Marketing*, 6(2)
- Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Walker, S. (2017). The captain class: A new theory of leadership. Random House.
- Waddington, L. (2022). Redefine Coaching & Athlete Development in Sports: The Framework to Freedom Method That Develops Strong Athletes and Outstanding Individuals. Meyer & Meyer Sport.
- Young, T. (2020). The making of a leader: What elite sport can teach us about leadership, management and performance. Hachette UK.