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Teacher Perceptions of Principals' Leadership Qualities: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

This mixed method study used survey research, open-ended questions, and interviews to identify transformational leadership qualities among principals of publicly funded schools in the Province of Alberta, Canada. Five-hundred-nine teachers (37.7%) from a random sample of schools in the province completed the Multifactor leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 1995; 2000), provided demographic information, and responded to four open-ended questions. Telephone interviews subsequently were conducted with selected teachers who had principals identified as being in the highest or lowest quartile of transformational leadership as determined by the MLQ.

The Chi-Square-goodness-of-fit test was used to determine a normal distribution for the groups, and Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) was used to analyze teacher ratings for principals on the variables of extra effort, effectiveness, and satisfaction. None of the differences could account for the variation in principal transformational leadership qualities.

Qualitative interpretation of the open-ended responses and subsequent interviews allowed for concluding that teachers preferred school principals who displayed transformational leadership characteristics in the areas of idealized influence, individual consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation. The educational importance of the information relates to administrator preparation, in-service development, teacher efforts, and student learning.

Objective

This presentation reports on the mixed methods study conducted to determine the dynamics of school leadership and how it affects teacher attitudes and performance. Behaviors, skills, qualities, and actions of transformational principals were determined to be pivotal for maximally enhancing public education (Duke and Leithwood, 1994; Fisher, 2003; Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; McIntyre, 2003; Nader, 1997; Philbin, 1997; Small, 2003). The position of school principal increasingly has become complex; changing demographics among students and staff, heightened public and legislative scrutiny, legal responsibilities extending beyond conventional educational parameters, retiring teachers, the addition of new teachers, and the expectation of demonstrating improved learning among students using the same or possibly reduced resources (Bess & Goldman, 2001). It is common for principals to be the most prominent local school professional and the person around whom school reputations develop. Most have high visibility in a community and most also are expected to attend to their professional obligations while serving as a mentor, role model, facilitator, counselor, disciplinarian, and public relations expert (Blase & Blase, 2000; Blase & Kirby, 1992; Deal & Peterson, 1990; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hallinger & Heck 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; 1996; 1999; 2000; 2000a)

There is a need to recognize how knowledge of leadership theory is translated into public school leader development, and if it helps in guiding or possibly altering the actions of persons entrusted with the responsibilities for the success of those entities. Alternatively, consideration

needs to be allocated to determining if transformational leadership among school principals is desired, and if so to what extent should it be manifested.

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to determine the extent to which transformational leadership was present among the principals from publicly funded schools in the Canadian province of Alberta, and how their respective teaching staffs responded to the leadership evidenced. The study also sought to learn if the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 1995; 2000) was an appropriate instrument for use in an educational environment and if it provided meaningful information about principal leadership.

Recognizing the potential limitations of using a tool not constructed for educators, the MLQ quantitative information was used to construct a qualitative component to the study. The benefits to using a mixed methods model were: the MLQ allowed for differentiating levels of principal transformational leadership as perceived by teachers; the interviews provided a venue for in-depth investigation of ambiguous statistical findings. A driving issue behind this investigation was the purported belief that transformational leadership provided a useful framework for interpreting principal behavior, particularly since so much had been expressed about the role of a principal shifting to an emphasis on facilitation and empowerment of professional staff (Grimmett, Rostad, & Ford, 1992; Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, & Slack, 1995, Short & Greer, 1997; Skalbeck's, 1991).

Perspective and Theoretical Framework

An in-depth literature review was conducted on relevant leadership literature, beginning with an examination of selected leadership theories: trait, (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Mann, 1959; McGregor, 1957; 1960) behavior/style (Stogdill, 1948;

Stogdill, 1974, Stogdill & Coons, 1957), situational/contingency (Dow and Oakley, 1992; Fiedler, 1972; Fielder, 1993; Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Hardy, Sack, & Harpine, 1973; Hersey and Blanchard, 1977; 1982; 1988; Peters, Hartke, & Pohlman, 1985; Strube & Garcia, 1981; Vecchio 1987), leader membership exchange (Burns & Otte 1999 ; Dansereau, Cashman, & Graen, 1973; Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Dienesch and Liden, 1986; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Linden & Maslyn, 1998; Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998) path-goal (Creed & Enns, 1979; Filley & House, 1969; Fleishman & Harris, 1962; House, 1971; House, Filley, & Gutjarati, 1971; House, Filley, & Kerr, 1971; House & Mitchell, 1974; 1996; Oklander & Fleishman, 1964; Schriesheim and Schriesheim, 1980), charisma (Bass, 1985; Conger, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; 1998; House 1996; Weber, 1947, and transformational models (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Avolio, 1999; Avolio, Kahai, Dum Dum, & Sivasubramaniam, 2001; Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Barnett, McCormick, and Connors, 2001; Bass, 1985; 1990; 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1994; 1995; 2000; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Bycio, Hackett & Allen, 1985; Corrigan, Diwan, Campion, & Rashid, 2002; Geyer & Steyer, 1998; Hatter & Bass, 1985; ; Howell & Avolio, 1993; King, 1989; Kirby, King, & Paradise, 1992; Seltzer, Numerof, & Bass, 1989; Silins; 1992; Tichy & Devenna, 1990; Yammarino & Bass, 1990).

The review traced the evolution of leadership theory from two factor models to the multifactor model of transformational leadership. It was determined that the components of transformational leadership were the most compatible with the leadership behaviors needed today in public education.

As the most widely used and validated tool available for determining leadership type, (Antonkis, Avolio, and Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Avolio, 1999; Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999;

Bass, 1998; Hatter & Bass, 1985; Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Yammarino & Bass, 1990) the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was selected to determine the extent to which school principals exhibited transformational leadership, and how such leadership behaviors were perceived by their respective teachers. The literature reviewed encouraged believing that teachers responded positively to transformational leadership, and they valued being involved with the creation of policies, practices, visioning, mission statements, and decision-making, for their schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; 1996; 1999; 2000; 2000a). The interpretation made from literature reviewed was that teachers want to be considered as members of a team. Involvement with operations and activities on a reasonable basis encouraged a sense of belonging and that translated into a greater investment in a school.

Methods and Data Sources

A mixed methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003) was used to answer the study research questions. It involved two phases. Phase 1 was the quantitative phase and Phase 2 was the qualitative phase. The methodology and data gathering process for each phase is described below.

Phase I – Quantitative – Four Hypotheses

The purpose of the first phase was to determine the transformational leadership levels of principals in Alberta, based on teachers' perceptions, as determined by the MLQ. Four hypotheses were tested. The first hypothesis related to clarifying if the sample distribution was normal. The subsequent three hypotheses tested the predictive potential of extra effort, satisfaction and effectiveness, as measured by the MLQ.

Hypotheses

H1-A₀

There is no statistically significant difference in the distribution of principals rated as having high levels of transformational qualities and principals identified with low levels of transformational qualities.

H2-A₀

There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' ratings of principals on transformational subscale scores and the teachers' ratings of principals on the MLQ outcome variable of extra effort.

H3-A₀

There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' ratings of principals on transformational subscale scores and the teachers' ratings of principals on the MLQ outcome variable of satisfaction.

H4-A₀

There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' ratings of principals on transformational subscale scores and the teachers' ratings of principals on the MLQ outcome variable of effectiveness.

The quantitative phase also was used to group the principals into categories of high or low transformational actions (based on the MLQ ratings). Principals rated as being in the middle classification were not used because the MLQ central tendency data did not allow for clear distinctions among three groupings.

A random sample of 135 schools (one principal per school) throughout the Province of Alberta, Canada was selected. Data was collected with the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) Survey in which 1350 surveys were distributed (10 teachers per school). The MLQ was administered in conjunction with demographic questions and open-ended responses. Statistical analysis used included Chi Square and Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM). The response rate from the teachers was 37.7% (509).

Phase II – Qualitative – Open – Ended Responses and Interviews

The purpose of the second phase was to explore, through qualitative means, how principal behavior affected teachers. This was completed in two steps. During Step 1 teachers' responses to four open-ended questions in Phase 1 were analyzed based on the level of the principal's transformational leadership behaviors. During the second step follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with 9 teachers from the high and low categories of transformational principals to garner a greater understanding of desired principal behaviors. The constant comparison method was used to identify common categories.

Research Questions – Qualitative

The following research questions were presented to teachers for open-ended responses and were expanded upon during the interview with purposely selected participants.

1. What words (positive and negative) were used by teachers to describe characteristics and behaviors exhibited by school principals?
2. What actions did teachers want principals to continue?
3. What actions did teachers want principals to stop?
4. What actions did teachers want principals to start?
5. What were teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership styles?

Results

Phase I – Quantitative

All four hypotheses were accepted. Chi Square analysis determined that there was no statistically significant difference in the distribution of principals rated as having high levels of transformational qualities and principals identified with low levels of transformational qualities. Based on the Hierarchical Linear Modeling analysis no statistically significant difference was found in teachers' ratings of principals on transformational subscale scores and the teachers' ratings of principals on the MLQ outcome variables of extra effort, satisfaction, and effectiveness.

Phase II Qualitative

Four themes from the analysis of the open-ended response and the individual interviews emerged: idealized influence, individual consideration, inspiration motivation, and intellectual stimulation. For each theme, specific behaviors of principals were identified as being desirable by teachers.

The four themes have been documented in the literature and are described below:

Idealized Influence

Transformational leaders behave in ways that result in them being role models for followers to emulate over time. ... Among the things leaders do ... is to consider the needs of others over personal needs, [and] often willingly sacrifice personal gain for the sake of others. Leaders share risks with followers and are consistent rather than arbitrary over time. They can be counted on to do the right thing, demonstrating high standards of ethical and moral conduct. ... Transformational leaders avoid using personal gain but will use sources of power at their disposal to move individuals or groups toward accomplishing their mission, vision and cause. ... Often the idealized leader is perceived as being the central force in moving the group forward and the person who sees what she or he should be doing next (Avolio, 1999, p. 43-44).

Individualized Consideration

The transformational leader pays special attention to individual needs for achievement and growth by acting as coach, mentor, teacher, facilitator, confidant, and counselor. ... New learning opportunities are created, along with a supportive climate for learning to occur. Individual differences in terms of needs and desires are continuously recognized. ... A two-way exchange in communication is encouraged, and "management by continuous engagement" is the norm in practice. Interactions with followers are personalized. ... Such leaders delegate tasks as a means of developing followers. Delegated tasks are monitored to see whether followers need additional direction or support and to assess progress. Followers do not feel they are being checked up on at all. Why? They trust their leader's intentions (Avolio, 1999, p. 47-49).

Inspirational Motivation

Transformational leaders behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers' work. Team spirit is enhanced. Such leaders display enthusiasm and optimism. ... They can inspire others by what they say, by what they do, and at the highest end of the range, by both (Avolio, 1999, p. 45).

Intellectual stimulation

Transformational leaders stimulate their followers' efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations with new methods and perspectives. Creativity is encouraged as a high norm for conduct. New ideas and creative problem solutions are solicited from followers. ... Nothing is too good, too fixed, too political, or too bureaucratic that it can't be challenged, changed, retired, and/or abandoned (Avolio, 1999, p. 46).

Step 1- The open-ended responses surprisingly revealed a dearth of descriptors (positive and negative) provided by teachers for the principals perceived to have low levels of transformational qualities. It was unclear why there was an absence of descriptors; despite the fact most of those principals had some positive transformational qualities. A second striking finding was the surprising absence of examples of desired transformational actions exhibited by principals classified as being in the low group.

Teacher perceptions of principals with high levels of transformational qualities commonly expressed that the principals were visible consistently throughout the school and especially in classrooms. They (principals) were highly visible, demonstrated consistency and fairness when dealing with staff and students, and that decisions were based on principles, while focusing on what was best for students. That group of principals held high expectations for both staff and students. They led by example, encouraged the professional growth of teachers, and were not hesitant to challenge and question assumptions. They commonly used a collaborative approach, as they sought input from teachers and involved them in the decision-making processes. In addition to being viewed as accessible, approachable, and available, those principals reportedly fostered leadership among all teachers, as they sought to empower staff. The group of high transformational leadership principals celebrated the successes and efforts of staff and students, and often used humor to create an enjoyable learning environment.

Step 2 – Principal behavior. Interviews from teachers with principals having low transformational leadership scores were consistent in reporting their principals had marginal influence on teachers and the schools. That group of principals apparently preferred limiting the development of leadership capacity to a selected administrative team. Notably, those principals

did seek some input on decisions affecting the entire school, but it was stated that selected persons had much greater influence on what subsequently transpired, or did not happen. Other salient comments about the low transformational leadership principals included: they did not monitor teacher activities; and they demonstrated a lax attitude toward intellectual stimulation as evidenced by an apparent lack of interest in professional development. While those principals supported individual professional development initiatives, they did not act as role models or collaborators, and generally were not receptive to new ideas or avenues leading to change. They discussed and shared visioning with the professional staff, but decision-making was reserved for their 'coterie', and there were minimal or no initiatives toward reflective practice or problem-solving.

Interviews from teachers with principals having high transformational scores showed a clear consensus. This group of principals was viewed as effective disciplinarians who focused on making students responsible. They were good teacher and leader role models, who fostered leadership development for all staff. Those principals used collaboration effectively and were receptive to exploring new ideas. They committed resources to agreed upon projects and consulted with those affected by projects, initiatives, or concerns. They spoke frequently and optimistically about the future, and were described as honest, trustworthy, transparent, professional and not ego driven.

The qualitative data was interpreted to mean teachers wanted principals to be consistent in their practice of transformational leadership. In fact, all such behaviors were sought and applauded by teachers regardless of the nature of the leadership displayed by their respective principals.

Conclusion and Educational Importance

The MLQ analysis did not reveal any statistically significant differences for the transformational leadership scores when studying levels of satisfaction, effectiveness, and extra effort among teachers. Importantly, the qualitative data supported and clarified distinctions between principals displaying high and low levels of transformational behaviors. The qualitative information provided clear explanations of behaviors teachers wanted principals to exhibit, and was interpreted to mean teachers who worked with principals evidencing high transformational behaviors were more enthusiastic about their jobs and had a greater sense of self-efficacy. The outcome from a confluence of highly transformational principals and teachers with greater self-efficacy could be enhanced learning by students, with no increase in funding required.

This study has several implications as there are specific behaviors teachers described as areas all principals need to address. School leadership is crucial; impacting teachers, staff, and ultimately student learning. This research could be used as a springboard to enhance current leadership practices and to help in the preparation of new principals and to provide important in-service training for existing principals.

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