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SCHOOL CLIMATE AND LEADERSHIP OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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Abstract

Educational leaders have the power and responsibility to impact school climate as well as student achievement. This study identified various educational leadership characteristics important for an educational leader to possess as perceived by teachers. This study found a hybrid of leadership characteristics is most optimal.

Purpose

Transformational leadership of principals is a fundamental component in the establishment of a positive school climate. A positive school climate is vital in student achievement, teacher retention and teacher motivation as well as the success of a school. The purpose of this research is to examine the specific characteristics and traits the transformational leader exhibits which positively impacts school climate.

Problem Statement

What characteristics or traits of a transformational leader promotes a positive school climate?

Rationale for the Study

Research has shown that transformational leadership is conducive to a positive school climate. A positive school climate has a significant impact on motivation, retention and happiness of teachers which ultimately impacts the academic success of students. There is lack of information in the literature which isolates, ranks and prioritizes importance of specific characteristics or traits a transformational leader exhibits helping to establish a positive school climate through which the entire school community benefits. The aim of the study is to isolate and prioritize specific traits and characteristics of a transformational leader impactful in developing a positive school climate.

Definitions

Instructional Leader- one who is involved in setting goals, managing curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, allocating resources and evaluating teachers regularly to promote student learning and growth.

Leadership- the art of motivating a group of people to act to achieve a common goal.

School Climate- refers to the quality and character of school life. It reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices and organizational structure.

School Culture- set of beliefs, values and assumptions shared by members of a school community; traditions; unwritten rules of a school.

Transactional Leadership- a style of leadership in which leaders promote compliance by followers through both rewards and punishments. It creates short-term motivation in its followers through the rewards and punishment system.

Transformational Leadership- a leadership approach that causes change in individuals and social systems. In its ideal form, it creates valuable and positive change in the followers with the end goal of developing followers into leaders.

Literature Review

As roles, responsibilities and expectations of school administrators have evolved throughout the decades in the American education system, so have educational leadership styles. School administrators have more responsibilities, accountability measures and challenges laid before them than ever before. One of the greatest challenges school administrators face is developing and maintaining a positive school climate. School administrators are taxed with leading in a way that creates, develops and sustains a positive school climate. The transformational leadership style appears to be a major influence in developing and maintaining a positive school climate.

Role of School Administrators

School administrators play a vital role in a school's success. The principal is the most influential factor in the effectiveness of a school (Edmonds, 1979). There have been many attempts to explain and describe the role of a school administrator. McKeever (2003) describes the four main areas of responsibility of a school administrator as work tasks, team building, development of leadership and ensuring lasting support of work. Pont, Nusche and Morrman (2008) summarizes an educational administrator's role as being categorized into professional development, setting goals, managing resources (including human and financial), and finally, creating conditions for improving school practice. And lastly, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris

Running head: CLIMATE AND LEADERSHIP

and Hopkins (2006) categorizes a school administrator's responsibilities into setting goals, professional development, organizing teaching and organizing the school.

Hipp and Bredeson (1995) more simply describes the role of an administrator as stimulating, nurturing and supporting teachers. Bosster, Dwyer, Rowen and Lee (1982) also discuss the role of the school administrator in simplistic terms such as being a good role model, working collaboratively and encouraging cooperation among others.

School Administrators' Evolving Roles

The role of school administrator has evolved over the last several decades as new challenges and opportunities have unfolded in the American educational system. Roles have moved from program manager to instructional leader to transformational leader (Hallinger, 1992).

In the 1960s and 1970s, new federal programs were being introduced into the educational system and with them, the federal funding of these programs. Most of these federal programs were aimed at assisting students with disabilities and other special student populations (Hallinger, 1992). This period was a time when school administrators acted as program managers focused on the federal compliance of these federally mandated programs (Hallinger, 1992).

During the 1980s the educational administrator's role began to evolve into one focused on instructional leadership. The school administrator was viewed as the go-to person for knowledge about the development of a school's programming (Hallinger, 1992). This was an era when a school's administrator was expected to closely observe instruction, teachers and implement interventions as needed (Hallinger, 1992).

In the 1990s an educational administrator's role changed yet again. During an interview, Sergiovanni (1992, p. 48) stated

Instructional leader suggests that others have got to be followers. The legitimate instructional leaders, if we have to have them, ought to be teachers. And principals ought to be leaders of leaders: people who develop the instructional leadership in their teachers.

This began the era of transformational leadership. Student achievement was not sufficient and a new type of leader was beginning to evolve. Although James McGregor Burns coined the term transformational leadership in 1978 in a book he published titled *Leadership*, transformational leadership of school administrators did not come to light until the 1990s.

Leadership

There are numerous and varied definitions of leadership. Often, the definition of leadership depends on the context. Many theorists have attempted to categorize and describe characteristics of various types of leadership styles. Some of the most popular leadership styles frequently studied and written about are distributed leadership, transactional leadership, Laissez- Faire leadership, democratic leadership and servant leadership. However, transformational leadership is the most widely studied form of leadership (Sun, Chen and Zhang, 2017).

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is a leadership style that opposes the top-down approach, or authoritarian leadership style. It does not identify with just one leader being in charge of or being responsible for everything. Distributed leadership recognizes the need of cooperative decision making from all stake holders (Smylie, Lazarus and Conyers, 1996).

As stated by Harris (2012, p. 8)

This shift is quite dramatic and can be summarized as a move from being someone at the apex of the organisation [sic], making decisions, to seeing their core role as developing the leadership capacity and capability of others.

Schools that practice distributed leadership value a shared vision and goals and work cooperatively to achieve those.

Laissez-Faire Leadership

Laissez-Faire is a leadership style in which the leader provides the necessary tools to get a job done, but the problem solving and execution of the project is left up to the followers. Feedback and monitoring of project completion is absent. The leader does not provide much support or guidance to the group. This is a very hands-off approach to leadership. There is often a lack of presence of the leaders leading to mistrust within the organization (Tosunoglu and Eckmekci, 2016). Bass and Avolio (1990) describe this leadership style as “the absence of leadership” and “the avoidance of intervention” (as cited in Tosunoglu et al., 2016). Laissez-Faire leadership is not ideal for groups who are unmotivated or unskilled.

Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership is a leadership style keeping central democratic values at the core, such as student equity (Kilicoglu, 2018). Democratic leadership encourages group participation and decision making from all members and establishes collaboration with active cooperation as a norm (Kilicoglu, 2018). According to Sharma and Singh (2013) democratic leaders provide guidance while actively collaborating and seeking input from subordinates. Democratic leaders have trust and confidence in their subordinates. A “majority rules” is the philosophy adopted by a democratic leader (Sharma and Singh, 2013).

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a style of leadership in which the focus is on serving others above themselves (Black, 2010). The servant leader’s needs are behind the needs of those whom he or she leads. The servant leader provides support to teams, assumes non-central roles within the team and does not expect acknowledgement (Black, 2010). The servant leader’s motivation comes from serving others. Spears (1988) did extensive work on servant leadership and he identified ten characteristics of a servant leader. The characteristics he identified are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is a leadership style under which both leaders and followers stay in their own lanes and the relationships and roles stay stagnant (Pinkas & Bulic, 2017). Furthermore, it is based on a “give and take” relationship and is contingent upon rewards and consequences (Pinkas & Bulic, 2017). A transactional leader defines the expectations and

provides rewards when a job is done well. Innovative thinking by the followers is not an expectation (Eyal and Kark, 2004). Transactional leadership lacks the foundation to raise leaders, to encourage critical and creative thinking and to encourage a collaborative community.

Transformational Leadership

Pinkas and Bulic (2017) point out that McGregor Burns was the first to discuss transformational leadership in 1978. This type of leadership style has a transforming effect on its leaders and the led (Burns, 1978). Burns (1978) identified four areas of transformational leadership: charisma, inspirational motivation, individualized attention and intellectual stimulation. Bass (1990) identified the four areas of transformational leadership with slight variances and adds individualized care, model of identification, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation.

Leithwood (1992) further identified four goals of transformational leaders within a school. Those four goals are to develop a collaborative school culture, foster teacher development, increase problem solving among a group and getting all people committed to the school mission, school goals and the strategic planning of the school.

In transformational leadership, both the followers and the leaders have a bond focusing them on raising motivation and morality in both parties (Boncana, 2014). Avolio and Bass (2002) suggest transformational leadership increases motivation, morality and performance and

there is a common bond between the leaders and followers. McKenzie (2005) points out that Burns further says leaders and the followers are all committed to doing what is best for their school and they hold a common belief system.

Impact of Leadership Styles

Most leaders develop a hybrid of leadership styles (Pinkas & Bulic, 2017). In fact, Bass (1998) says transactional leadership is the foundation of a leader evolving into a transformational leader. Just as people do not always fit perfectly into other labels and categories, the same is true with leadership styles. Often it is referred to as the “dominant leadership style” for this very reason (Pinkas & Bulic, 2017). Marks and Printy (2003) suggest the combination of distributed leadership and transformational leadership is the optimal leadership style.

Transformational leaders seem to impact schools and teachers in a more positive way than leaders having a different dominant leadership style. Hauserman and Stick (2013) discussed a study done by Eval and Roth in 2011 which showed a large correlation between teacher motivation and leadership style of principals. There is an increased level of commitment from teachers who perceive their administrators as being transformational leaders (Hauserman & Stick, 2013). According to Hauserman and Stick (2013), a study done by Philbin in 1997 showed teachers who perceived their principals as highly transformational were more likely to demonstrate a higher level of effort in their work, be happier at work and hold the belief leadership in their school was superior of other schools’ leadership.

School Climate

There are numerous and various definitions and descriptions of school climate. Some words used to describe school climate are “atmosphere” (Black, 2010) and “environment” (Pepper, 2001). Pinkas and Bulic (2017, pg. 38) defines school climate as “the invisible dimension of school life.” To further complicate matters, some authors use the term “school culture” interchangeably with “school climate,” yet some authors make a clear distinction between the two (Pinkas & Bulic, 2017).

The main dimensions of school climate are identified differently, yet overlap. Thapa, Cohen, Guffey and Higgins-D’Alessandro (2013) identify five dimensions of school climate. Those dimensions are safety, relationships, teaching and learning, environment and school improvement process. Johnson, Stevens and Zvoch (2007) identify the five dimensions of school climate as collaboration, decision-making, instructional innovation, student relations and school resources. Regardless of which framework is used, all the identified dimensions are fundamental pieces in to the development of a positive school climate.

There is an overwhelming amount of research and evidence to suggest the importance school climate has on student success (Thapa, et. al, 2013). Thapa, et. al (2013) observe student academic achievement, student mental health and student physical health are directly correlated to a positive school climate. Schools which foster mutual respect and hold high standards increase the motivation of learners (Arrends, 1998) and school climate has a substantial impact on the success of a schools’ teachers and students (Pepper & Hamilton, 2002).

As stated by Thapa, et al (2013, p.369):

School climate matters. Sustained positive school climate is associated with positive child and youth development, effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement, increased student graduation rates, and teacher retention.

Summary

A principal's leadership style has a major impact on school climate and the learning environment (Pepper & Hamilton, 2002). A principal can lead in a way which promotes a positive school climate, thus increasing student achievement. On the contrary, a principal can also lead, or manage, in a way uncondusive to a positive school climate and can negatively impact student achievement.

The transformational leadership style tends to have the qualities most conducive to developing and nurturing a positive school climate. Transformational leaders raise leaders, support their followers' individual needs and encourage their followers to become innovative thinkers. Transformational leaders find value in collaborative approaches to problem solving. Transformational leaders are not managers, but lead in a way not focused on position and power, but rather the best interest of the people within the school. Transformational leadership leads to more committed teachers and increased student learning (Hauserman & Stick, 2013).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used for this study using survey data gathered from teachers from a single elementary school in central Virginia.

Method of Inquiry

Qualitative survey research was the chosen method for this study in an attempt to gain in-depth information about people's perceptions, motivations and reasoning.

Procedures

Participants were recruited using an e-mail invitation explaining the purpose and the goal of the research project. Participants acknowledged consent prior to participating. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of University of Mary Washington, the school administrator and the cooperating school division, Spotsylvania County Public Schools.

The survey was conducted using Google Survey. All participant responses were anonymous. Twenty surveys were completed by elementary school teachers in a single elementary school in central Virginia. There were a total of thirty-one questions. Participants were asked to complete a scale for each survey question ranging from "very important" to "no importance" on isolated characteristics of various leadership styles.

Survey Items

The survey participants were asked to rate the importance of each characteristic of various leadership styles. The rating scale for each characteristics ranged from “very important” to “no importance”. The following items were rated using a Likert scale of importance:

1. A school leader who accepts criticism with grace.
2. A school leader who is “hands-on” during professional development and PLCs.
3. A school leader who treats me as an individual with unique skills and talents.
4. A school leader who is knowledgeable about best teaching practices.
5. A school leader who is not afraid of confrontation.
6. A school leader who delegates most tasks and responsibilities.
7. A school leader who finds innovative solutions to long standing problems.
8. A school leader who has a willingness to tap into the expertise of those around him or her.
9. A school leader who is more intelligent than those he or she supervises.
10. A school leader who is detail oriented.
11. A school leader who makes personal connections with all faculty and staff.
12. A school leader who elicits input from all stakeholders.
13. A school leader who has a “no nonsense” approach.
14. A school leader who is charismatic.

15. A school leader who cultivates positive relationships among faculty members.
16. A school leader who inspires or motivates those in which he or she leads.
17. A school leader who leads by example.
18. A school leader who provides recognition to faculty and staff for a job well done.
19. A school leader who encourages others to grow in their role.
20. A school leader who provides leadership opportunities.
21. A school leader who is intellectually engaging.
22. A school leader who encourages teamwork.
23. A school leader who makes others feel valued.
24. A school leader who makes others feel heard.
25. A school leader who talks to every faculty and staff member one on one.
26. A school leader whose presence demands respect.
27. A school leader who avoids confrontation with others.
28. A school leader who communicates clear expectations.
29. A school leader who is visible around the school.
30. A school leader who communicates clearly and efficiently.
31. A school leader who does not micromanage faculty and staff.

Data Analysis

Twenty teachers from a single elementary school completed a survey on isolated characteristics of various leadership styles.

Each item was ranked from “very important” to “no importance” by each participant. Point values were assigned for each item correlating with each participant’s response, as shown in

Figure 1.

Figure 1: Point values assigned to rankings by participants

<u>Ranking</u>	<u>Point Value</u>
Very Important	5
Moderately Important	4
Neutral	3
Somewhat Unimportant	2
No Importance	1

Figure 2 shows each question, primary leadership style for which the given characteristic correlates most strongly with and the point value assigned per participant responses. Point values ranged from forty-three points to ninety-nine points. The average response was 85.22 points.

Figure 2: Leadership characteristics related to leadership styles and given point values

Research Question Number	Primary Leadership Style(s)	Point Value
1	Transformational	91
2	Democratic	82
3	Transformational	99
4	Varies; can fit all or none of the leadership styles	96

5	Transactional	73
6	Laissez- Faire, Servant	63
7	Transformational	88
8	Laissez-Faire, Servant, Transformational, Democratic	95
9	Varies; can fit all or none of the leadership styles	48
10	Transactional	72
11	Transformational	93
12	Distributed, Democratic, Servant	92
13	Transactional	76
14	Transformational	72
15	Democratic, Servant, Transformational	97
16	Transformational	92
17	Servant, Transformational	95
18	Transactional	88
19	Servant, Transformational	91
20	Distributed, Servant	82
21	Transformational	77
22	Distributed, Democratic, Servant, Transformational	90
23	Transformational, Democratic, Servant	98
24	Transformational, Democratic, Servant	98
25	Transformational, Democratic	87
26	Transactional	78
27	Varies; can fit all or none of the leadership styles	43
28	Transactional	99
29	Democratic, Servant	95
30	Transactional	97
31	Laissez- Faire	95

Figure 3 shows the two questions with the lowest point values. The items with the lowest point values did not describe an exclusive leadership style, but rather the trait could potentially be present in any leadership style or none at all. Question number 27 received the lowest point

value. The respondents were asked to rate “A school leader who avoids confrontation with others” from a rating scale of “very important” to “no importance.” From the findings, this was the least important identified characteristic of an educational leader. The second least important characteristic of an educational leader from the given data was “A school leader who is more intelligent than those he or she supervises.”

Figure 3: Lowest point values for given leadership characteristics

Question Number	Question	Value	Primary Leadership Style
27	A school leader who avoids confrontation with others	43	Varies; can fit all or none of the leadership styles
9	A school leader who is more intelligent than those he or she supervises	48	Varies; can fit all or none of the leadership styles

Figure 4 shows the characteristics of an educational leader most important to teachers. Of the most important characteristics identified, the leadership styles primarily identified with those characteristics are the transformational and servant leadership styles, each appearing six times.

The two most important educational leadership characteristics identified through the survey data were “a school leader who treats me as an individual with unique needs” (transformational) and “a school leader who communicates clear expectations” (transactional). Both of these characteristics received a value of 99 points. Two other educational leadership characteristics

ranked closely behind, both of which received a value of 98 points. The first was “a school leader who makes others feel valued” and the second was “a school leader who makes others feel heard.” Both of these characteristics primarily correlate to the transformational, servant and democratic leadership styles.

Figure 4: Highest point values for given leadership characteristics

Question Number	Question	Value	Primary Leadership Style
3	A school leader who treats me as an individual with unique needs	99	Transformational
4	A school leader who is knowledgeable about best teaching practices	96	Varies; can fit various leadership styles
8	A school leader who has the willingness to tap into the expertise of those around him or her	95	Laissez-Faire, Servant, Transformational, Democratic
15	A school leader who cultivates positive relationships among faculty members	97	Democratic, Servant, Transformational
17	A school leader who leads by example	95	Servant, Transformational
23	A school leader who makes others feel valued	98	Transformational, Democratic, Servant
24	A school leader who makes others feel heard	98	Transformational, Democratic, Servant
28	A school leader who communicates clear expectations	99	Transactional

29	A school leader who is visible around the school	95	Democratic, Servant
30	A school leader who communicates clearly and efficiently	97	Transactional
31	A school leader who does not micromanage faculty and staff	95	Laissez-Faire

Figure 5 represents the average points earned by the participants for each leadership style presented within the survey. Democratic leadership ranked highest with 92.6% average points followed by transformational leadership with an average of 90.8% points. The lowest ranked leadership style was transactional leadership with an average of 83.2% points.

Figure 5: Leadership styles' average point value

<u>Leadership Style</u>	<u>Average Points Earned</u>
Transformational Leadership	90.8%
Transactional Leadership	83.2%
Laissez- Faire Leadership	84.3%
Democratic Leadership	92.6%
Servant Leadership	90.5%
Distributed Leadership	88%

Findings and Conclusions

The first major theme identified through data analysis was teachers want their leaders to listen to them and value their input. Listening to ones' followers and valuing their input most closely represents qualities of transformational, democratic and servant leaders. All three of these leadership styles place emphasis on relationships and personal interest in those in which one leads. As described by Burns (1978), personal interest in ones' followers is one of the four major components of a transformational leader. Spears (1988) identified listening as one of the ten major components of being a servant leader. Lastly, work done by Kilicoglu (2018) demonstrates that decision making by all stakeholders is a major leadership characteristic of a democratic leader.

Another identified trend was teachers want their leaders to promote and encourage positive, collaborative relationships among faculty and staff. This leadership characteristic is evident in democratic, servant, transformational and distributed leadership styles. As evidenced by Leithwood (1992), a collaborative school culture is one of the four major goals of transformational leaders. Smylie, Lazarus and Conyers (1996) recognizes the need for cooperative decision making as part of distributed leadership. Democratic leadership encourages group participation and decision making from all members and establishes collaboration with active cooperation as a norm (Kilicoglu, 2018). Furthermore, Spears (1988) found that building community is one of the ten traits evident in the servant leadership style.

Lastly, it is evident from this study that a hybrid of leadership styles is desired by teachers from their educational leaders. Although some leadership styles scored higher as opposed to others, most desired leadership characteristics encompass a variety of leadership styles. According to Pinkas and Bulic (2017), most leaders develop a hybrid of leadership styles. Just as people do not always fit perfectly into other labels and categories, the same is true with

leadership styles. Often it is referred to as the “dominant leadership style” for that very reason (Pinkas & Bulic, 2017).

Recommendations for Further Study

A principal’s leadership style has a major impact on school climate and the learning environment (Pepper & Hamilton, 2002). A principal can lead in a way which promotes a positive school climate thus increasing student achievement. On the contrary, a principal can also lead, or manage, in a way uncondusive to a positive school climate and can negatively impact student achievement. It is important that we continue to research educational leadership in an effort to continue to raise effective leaders for today’s learners.

It could be of benefit to expand this research to include a larger scale of teachers at various school levels. It could also be of benefit to continue this research to find the optimal hybrid of educational leadership qualities.

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