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Walking the Talk: Educational Administration Candidates' Espoused and Observed Dispositions


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WALKING THE TALK: EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION CANDIDATES' ESPOUSED AND OBSERVED DISPOSITIONS*

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1 Introduction

Teachers who seek a career as a school administrator envision their leadership will be transformational and charismatic—and are often surprised by the conflict and confrontation that is an inevitable part of school administration (Hall, 2008; Hartzell, Williams, & Nelson, 1995; Sigford, 2005). Just as preservice teachers imagine a future career where all children love learning and respect teachers, only to find a reality that is less utopian (Su, 1992), this disconnect between the ideal of the vision and the reality and the new job often produces disappointment and shock (Senge, et al., 2000).

The reality is that successful school leaders must engage the school and community in the development of school structures and climates that will promote change, innovation, and creativity to educate the most diverse group of students ever seen in U.S. schools (CCSSO, 2008; Jazzar & Algozzine, 2006; Murphy, 2006). School administrators are responsible for improving teaching, learning, and student achievement at all levels of public and private education, and so developing and assessing the potential for this leadership is central to the mission of educational administration programs.

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Along with knowledge and skills, dispositions form the basis of what a school leader can bring to the critical and creative tasks of educational administration. Dispositions, “the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behavior” (NCATE, 2002, p. 53), can be more difficult to teach and assess than knowledge or skills (Edick, Danielson, & Edwards, 2005; Edwards & Edick, 2006). Development of positive dispositions must be vigorously and intentionally addressed by school leadership preparation programs, because administrators who have not developed positive dispositions have trouble being leaders of an effective schools (Davis, 1998; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Heifetz, 2006).

Therefore, it is imperative for those who prepare administrators to assess and encourage the development of these dispositions in a deliberate, sequential manner. At our university, beginning candidates in educational leadership are made aware of administrative dispositions by assessing themselves on the Administrator Dispositions Index (ADI). As they progress through their courses, dispositions are directly and indirectly addressed. The ADI is again completed at the midpoint and capstone of the program so that candidates can reflect upon their needs and strengths.

Annually, the faculty has analyzed the ADI results to provide information for program improvement. While this has been enlightening, when trying to understand and explain the beliefs and values of candidates, it is not enough to analyze expressed views. People explain their actions as espoused theories, but their theories-in-use (actual patterns of actions) can only be measured through observation (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Espoused theories, such as those gathered through the ADI, need to be examined within actual practice (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002; Keiser, 2007).

The EDAD Follow-Up Survey (FUS) was therefore created so that supervisors of practicum candidates could assess candidates’ readiness to be school leaders (Smith, 2008). Practicum supervisors were chosen for this assessment because they view candidates operating in a leadership role during capstone projects. Data from the FUS can be utilized to approximate candidates’ theories-in-use as responses are observational rather than self-assessment.

By comparing the ADI and FUS responses as matched pairs, a clearer picture of candidates’ leadership dispositions emerges. This information can guide EDAD faculty and educational leadership programs in exploring ways to support the development of positive dispositions. Thus the research question that guides this study was: To what extent are EDAD candidates’ self-perceptions of administrator dispositions congruent with their employers’ perceptions of the dispositions the candidates actually exhibit while leading?

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were the candidates in the Masters/Endorsement program in Educational Administration and Supervision at the University of Nebraska at Omaha ($n = 63$) and their practicing administrators who served as their site supervisors ($n = 63$) for the practicum. The candidates were either seeking a Masters Degree in Educational Administration with the elementary or secondary principal endorsement or just the principal endorsement if they already held a Masters Degree. The site supervisors were all practicing administrators at the school/department where the practicum activities were completed.

The data were collected while the candidates were enrolled in the practicum field experience. The practicum is a program of planned experiences in the field and includes at least 250 hours of experiences approved jointly by the school site supervisor and university supervisor. It is designed to provide candidates with hands-on experience in the school setting, allowing students to draw together the concepts they have learned in classroom studies and apply them as they work on specific tasks and projects in a school. Because the practicum assumes candidates bring a body of knowledge to the activity, candidates must have had completed a minimum of 24 semester hours of course work in the administrative program. Projects completed during practicum were decided through discussions between the candidate, the university practicum director, and the school site administrator with whom the candidate would be working (Smith, 2008).

The degree candidates completed the Administrator Dispositions Index (ADI) survey when they first entered the Education Administration and Supervision program, after completing 18 graduate hours of

credit, and a third time during the semester in which they participated in the practicum field experience. The ADI, which was developed by aligning the items of the ADI with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, is a 36-item survey contains a 19-item community-centered subscale and a 17-item student-centered subscale. Schulte and Kowal (2005) found the ADI to be "a reliable and valid instrument for measuring the dispositions of effective school leaders" (p. 85). Each candidate determines his or her commitment to each of the leadership dispositions on a 5-point scale ranging from "1," Strongly Disagree to "5," Strongly Agree. The ADI has been validated and utilized to assess development of positive dispositions in candidates seeking an administrative endorsement (Schulte & Kowal, 2005).

The EDAD Follow-Up Survey (FUS) incorporates the same 36-items as the ADI, but is worded to indicate the level of commitment to leadership dispositions observed in others rather than the level of commitment to leadership dispositions based on self-perceptions contained in the ADI. Each site supervisor included in the study completed the FUS for the EDAD candidate he or she was supervising during the practicum field experience.

2.2 Data Analysis

Related measure *t*-tests were used to compare the mean scores for candidates and their school-level supervisors for each of the subscale domains and for the total dispositions score. Table 1 shows the community-centered subscale mean scores and standard deviations for EDAD candidates and their supervisors, while Table 2 shows the student-centered subscale scores and standard deviations for the EDAD candidates and their supervisors.

2.3 Results

Related measure *t*-tests reveal that the community related dispositions scores for EDAD candidates ($M = 4.52, SD = 0.55$) were significantly lower than the community related dispositions scores for EDAD candidates' supervisors ($M = 4.90, SD = 0.20$), $t(62) = -5.03, p < .0005$ (two-tailed), $d = 1.01$. The student related dispositions scores for EDAD candidates ($M = 4.72, SD = 0.43$) were also significantly lower than the student related dispositions scores for EDAD candidates' supervisors ($M = 4.98, SD = 0.08$), $t(62) = -4.62, p < .0005$ (two-tailed), $d = 1.02$.

Total scores, which combined the community subscale and student subscales, were also compared. Related measure *t*-tests reveal that the total dispositions scores for EDAD candidates ($M = 4.62, SD = 0.48$) were significantly lower than the total dispositions scores for EDAD candidates' supervisors ($M = 4.94, SD = 0.14$), $t(62) = -4.98, p < .0005$ (two-tailed), $d = 1.0$.

Administrator Dispositions Index Community Domain

	Candidate		Supervisor	
Disposition Item - Community Domain	M	SD	M	SD
<i>continued on next page</i>				

I motivate others to change behaviors that inhibit professional and organizational growth.	4.40	0.80	4.84	0.45
I believe in mobilizing community resources to benefit children.	4.29	0.73	4.90	0.35
I anticipate responses of others and act to reduce negative impact.	4.40	0.71	4.79	0.41
I am committed to an informed public.	4.38	0.73	4.84	0.48
I respond in a timely manner to others who initiate contact with me.	4.68	0.64	4.89	0.36
I acknowledge achievement and accomplishment of others.	4.57	0.67	4.87	0.34
I deal appropriately and tactfully with people from different backgrounds.	4.70	0.59	4.94	0.25
I express verbal and/or non-verbal recognition of feelings, needs, and concerns of others.	4.56	0.74	4.87	0.38
<i>continued on next page</i>				

I continuously do the work required for high levels of performance for myself and the organization.	4.68	0.62	4.90	0.30
I believe families are partners in the education of their children.	4.57	0.64	4.98	0.13
I believe in the involvement of stakeholders in management processes.	4.44	0.72	4.81	0.50
I believe administrators should develop alliances and/or resources outside the school that improve the quality of teaching and learning.	4.32	0.83	4.97	0.18
I believe diversity brings benefits to the school community.	4.63	0.63	4.94	0.31
I communicate necessary information to the appropriate persons in a timely manner.	4.57	0.76	4.90	0.35
I am committed to the inclusion of all members of the school community.	4.60	0.64	4.92	0.33
<i>continued on next page</i>				

I believe it is important to dialogue with other decision-makers affecting education.	4.60	0.66	4.97	0.18
I am committed to collaboration and communication with families.	4.54	0.65	4.98	0.13
I believe administrators must take risks to improve schools to make them safer and more efficient and effective.	4.51	0.74	4.92	0.33
I generate enthusiasm and work to influence others to accomplish common goals.	4.57	0.71	4.90	0.30
Total Subscale Score	4.52	0.55	4.90	0.20

Table 1

Administrator Dispositions Index Student Domain

Disposition Item - Student Domain	Candidate		Supervisor	
	M	SD	M	SD
I am committed to high-quality standards, expectations, and performances.	4.76	0.53	4.98	0.13
<i>continued on next page</i>				

I believe all students are entitled access to the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become successful adults.	4.73	0.57	4.98	0.13
I believe all people can learn.	4.78	0.55	4.98	0.13
I am committed to the right of every child to a quality education.	4.83	0.42	4.98	0.13
I believe education is the key to opportunity and social mobility.	4.71	0.55	4.95	0.21
I believe a safe and supportive learning environment is essential.	4.84	0.45	4.98	0.13
I believe schools should prepare students to be contributing members of society.	4.70	0.59	4.97	0.18
I am committed to ethical principles in the decision-making process.	4.76	0.56	5.00	0.00
I believe administrators should work with faculty, staff, and students to develop a caring school community.	4.62	0.64	4.98	0.13

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I believe student learning is the fundamental purpose of schooling.	4.83	0.42	4.92	0.27
I believe schools must hold high standards of learning.	4.75	0.54	5.00	0.00
I am committed to the principles stated in the Bill of Rights.	4.67	0.67	5.00	0.00
I believe schools are an integral part of the larger community.	4.60	0.61	4.97	0.18
I believe there are a variety of ways in which students can learn.	4.67	0.67	5.00	0.00
I believe one should accept the consequences for upholding one's principles and actions	4.60	0.64	4.98	0.13
I believe that learning is life-long for me and others.	4.76	0.53	4.98	0.13
I believe that there are a variety of ways in which teachers can teach.	4.67	0.65	4.98	0.13
Total Subscale Score	4.72	0.43	4.98	0.08

Table 2

3 Discussion

3.1 Community Dispositions

Candidates in educational administration are typically current teachers, so they enter the program with a classroom view of education. Even at the capstone of their program, they still have had less outreach opportunities than their what their supervisors experience. Thus on items that address the external school community, such as, "I believe in mobilizing community resources to benefit children," and "I believe administrators should develop alliances and/or resources outside the school that improve the quality of teaching and

learning.” candidates indicate lack of confidence in themselves that their supervisors do not observe (Table 1, Candidates). The supervisors indicate less concern with developing resources than in having proactive interpersonal skills, as they scored candidates lowest on, “I (the candidate) anticipate responses of others and act to reduce negative impact,” and, “I believe in the involvement of stakeholders in management processes” (Table 1, Supervisors).

3.2 Student Centered Dispositions

Supervisors observed the student centered dispositions of administrative candidates consistently to be at or near 5 = strongly agree. Hopefully, the reason for this high scoring is that good teachers become good administrators, but it is also possible that supervisors regularly evaluate teachers on student centered instruction, and what is inspected is expected (Table 2, Supervisors). It is interesting to note that candidates’ lowest mean was on the item, “I believe administrators should work with faculty, staff, and students to develop a caring school community” (Table 2, Candidates). This is consistent with our other studies of candidate dispositions, and has been attributed to increased attention to diversity and a gap between knowing and doing caused by tradition, fear of change and focus on short-term measurements (Keiser, in progress; Schulte & Kowal, 2005).

3.3 Comparing Espoused and Observed Dispositions

University programs that prepare school leaders have been held responsible for a detachment between theory and reality (Hall, 2006; Martin & Papp, 2008; Murphy, 2006). Folk wisdom suggests that those preparing to become administrators would have a false sense of readiness for the realities of school leadership, and that practicing administrators (chosen as supervisors because of their own successes) would observe the lack of readiness in candidates. In fact, when creating the hypothesis for this study, it was supposed that the espoused dispositions of administrative candidates would be more positive than what was observed. Why then, were the observed dispositions higher on every item than what candidates espoused? Perhaps the difference lies in the lens of experience (Maxwell, 2004). Candidates measured themselves against a hope for perfection in future leadership, while supervisors observed from the standpoint of educational reality. That candidates wish to improve dispositions, while their bosses see them as ready to lead, is good news for not only the candidates but for the future of schools.

This good news will only last as long as positive school leadership dispositions are nurtured by endorsement program faculty, discussed in depth during classes, and lived by candidates. An educator’s knowledge of dispositions is founded in self-awareness—“the awareness that a person’s worldview is not universal, but is profoundly influenced by life experiences” (Villegas & Lucas, 2007, p. 31). Educators without this awareness overuse their own experience, and may misinterpret communication and behaviors of students and other adults.

Beyond awareness is the sense of community. In our program, candidates realize this from a theoretical standpoint (studying concepts like emotional intelligence in courses such as Interpersonal Skills in Educational Administration) as well as in practice (including service learning and field experiences in School Community Relations and Urban School Leadership). Whether it is the network of learners formed during class work or the new leadership roles practiced in the K-12 schools, at the foundation of dispositional growth is growth in relationships.

The single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve... Thus, leaders must be able to build relationships with and among diverse people and groups—especially with people different from themselves. Effective leaders know that people will be mobilized by caring and respect, by talented people working together, and by developing shared expertise. (Fullan, 2004, p. 77)

It is through interactions—both intention and spontaneous—that relationships are formed and a sense of community arises. Belenardo (2001) identifies the elements of a sense of school community as shared values, commitment, a feeling of belonging, caring, interdependence, and regular contact. Perceptions of the school community will vary among candidates (Griffith, 2000; Royal & Rossi, 1999) but as they identify

with their school and their role in the culture, they can begin to articulate and carry out their vision. These critical experiences in building relationships, which happen within the schools and are reflected upon in the university, encourage candidates to live their leadership philosophy and walk the talk of their beliefs.

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