

A Comparative Study of Leadership Characteristics of Adult Education Students and Professionals

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to assess self-perceived leadership styles practiced by adult educators and graduate-level adult education students adopting transformational leadership theory embodied in the Full Range of Leadership Model. Results show significant differences between practitioners and graduate students in mean scores for the transformative and transactional leadership style. The findings are discussed in terms of the implications for career development and leadership training of current and future adult educators.

Key Words: Leadership, Adult Education, Professional Development

Human resource development (HRD) programs in colleges and universities often feature faculty and courses related to adult education (Peterson & Provo, 2000). While acknowledging the contested domains of HRD and related disciplines (Kuchinke, 2004), there is evidence that many graduate programs in U.S. colleges of education feature adult education as partner or allied degree offerings (Kuchinke, 2002). As such, the study of adult education programs is of interest to HRD academics and professionals. Also of recent interest to both HRD and adult education scholars is the study of leadership (Ardichvili, 2001; Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2002; Kuchinke, 1999a). New approaches centered on transformational leadership continue to attract focused research attention on examining the attitudes, behaviors, and attributes of leaders as well as the influence of training and education on future leadership styles (Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Bass, 1999). This study examines leadership profiles and differences in leadership characteristics between adult educators employed in professional roles and those engaged in graduate study.

Adult educators are frequently noted for their leadership, and as a result, are often requested to assume leadership positions in a wide range of both professional and community organizations. How adult educators assume and practice leadership type is therefore an issue of considerable interest to adult education and human resource development. There is a movement suggesting that as a field, adult education needs to advance itself through heightened levels of professionalization (Brockett, 1989; Cervero, 1985). One means of achieving professionalization may be by instituting a more effective structure of leadership. However, such efforts may be limited as there is little framing research on what leadership characteristics are actually practiced by adult educators. An increasing level of conversation in professional development asks adult educators to become more concerned about leadership as understood from the perspective of adult and continuing educators (Fleming & Caffarella, 2000). There is opportunity for the field to deliver a consistent and constant offering of professional development opportunities. Focused attention to leadership training and development can assist this process and build opportunity furthering the movement to professionalization of the adult education field (Brockett, 1989; Cervero, 1985).

Problem Statement

Of all the phenomena researched by social scientists it has been suggested that leadership may be among one of the most examined (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004). Yet, adult education has infrequently studied leadership with little known about the leadership characteristics of those who engage in adult education work. One reason for lack of data on this important area may be that leadership is difficult to characterize as the adult education field is fragmented by inconclusive definitions regarding role and function (Shoemaker, 1998). As a consequence, Rose (1992) suggested that to develop a leadership model in adult education the field may need to look at other disciplines. However, there are many different existing models and theories of leadership which raises questions of the appropriateness of application to the adult education context.

This study seeks to address the lack of knowledge on leadership style practiced by adult educators by considering the Full Range of Leadership Model as an appropriate existing framework. This is then tested in a research study comparing the self-described leadership styles of those currently engaged in the adult education profession and those currently enrolled in a graduate level adult education degree program. It is hoped that the results will provide new information on the leadership types practiced by current and future adult educators.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership as an academic area of inquiry can trace almost a century of empirical and theoretical advancements. In recent years the development of transformational leadership theory embodied in the Full Range of Leadership Model has dominated in management and organizational studies (Antonakis, et al., 2004; Bass, 1998). The Full Range of Leadership Model proposes that leadership is practiced as a dynamic process of interaction between leader and follower and identifies leadership as practiced as three distinct types: transformational, transactional and laissez-faire. Each leadership type has distinguishing characteristics but in terms of overall effectiveness optimal leadership is practiced as primarily transformational followed by less effective transactional and laissez-faire styles (Avolio, 1999).

Northouse (2004) described transformational leadership as “a process that changes and transforms individuals. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals, and includes assessing followers’ motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings” (p. 169). This approach to leadership focuses on charismatic and affective elements of leaders. In addition, as Bass (1985) advocated, by engaging in transformational leadership behaviors a leader is able to transform the behavior and performance of followers. These behaviors result in the transformational leader bringing out performance in their followers at levels far beyond what normally might have been expected (Antonakis, et al., 2004). In regards to effect on others, an individual’s commitment to transformational leadership is apparent in these individuals paying particular attention to others needs, which, in turn, raises followers’ levels of motivation (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1998). In contrast to the transformational leadership style, more transactional leaders “approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another” (Burns, 1978, p.4) with the leader’s use of either reward or punishment being contingent on the follower’s completion or non-completion of assigned tasks. Laissez-faire leadership involves indifference and avoidance. A leader with this profile will “avoid making decisions, abdicate responsibilities, divert attention from hard choices, and will talk about getting down to work, but never really does” (Bass, 1998, p. 148).

As Bass (1999) described, every leader tends to display characteristics of both transformational and transactional leadership, although an individual’s profile will reflect more of one and less of the other. Leaders considered to be the most effective are more transformational and less transactional. The past two decades have produced many studies identifying positive outcomes between transformational leadership and a range of organizational outcomes across different types of organizations, industries, and settings (Bass, 1999). An important contribution has been research considering the role of national culture on preferences for transformational leadership (Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2002; Kuchinke, 1999a; Walumbwa, Orwa, Wang, & Lawler, 2005). More recent studies are now seeking to determine the influence of transformative leaders on broader social networks of organizational members (Bono & Anderson, 2005).

In HRD, workforce education, and adult education questions have been asked about transformational leadership in higher education (Kuchinke, 1999b). Such questions are important as students are no doubt influenced by a broad range of leaderships that they experience, in both workplaces and educational settings. Kelloway and Barling (2000) examined various approaches to training transformational leaders with more recent research by Parry and Sinha (2005) finding that the range of transformative leadership behaviors can be increased with training. The importance of gaining a greater understanding of the leadership characteristics of people in professional and higher education is supported by a studies finding that transformational leadership does positively affect critical organizational attitudes and outcomes (Barling et al., 1996; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002). However, little is known of the specific profiles exhibited by professional and graduate students in the adult education field.

Research Questions

The lack of substantive research on leadership characteristics within adult education could be due to the fact that, “many adult educators do not have formal preparation in teaching their content area to adults but have acquired experience and expertise through on-the-job training, mentoring, self-study, and staff development” (Marceau, 2003, p. 68). This increases the need to examine leadership with the field, both those currently employed and future practitioners currently engaged in graduate adult education study. Studying how leadership is currently practiced in adult education also provides an opportunity to apply new theoretical developments in leadership theory. One

means of examining the phenomena of leadership is through the Full Range of Leadership Model and the measurement tool: Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Form 5x (Bass & Avolio, 2000). The constructs implied in this model would have unmistakable impact and appear well suited to adult educators. Though the Full Range Leadership Model has been applied in numerous studies of leadership and in a variety of organizational and professional contexts, its application in the field of adult education is minimal.

Yet the extent to which adult education practitioners and graduate students exhibit characteristics associated with transformational leadership is not known. Using the Full Range of Leadership Model, a sample of practitioners and adult education students were selected to gather data on the profile of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership to address the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do practitioners in adult education and graduate students currently enrolled in an adult education degree program describe their leadership style?

Research Question 2: Are there significant differences in the way adult education practitioners and adult education students describe their leadership style?

Method

Data in this study was collected from two sample populations: individuals currently working in the adult education profession and graduate students enrolled in a university adult education program. A total of 195 individuals responded to a survey seeking to examine leadership profiles and then comparing the leadership style of adult education practitioners and those currently enrolled in an adult education graduate program. The sample of individuals currently engaged in working in the field came from an adult education professional association that serves a multi-state area in the Midwest of the United States. This organization is recognized as the oldest regional adult education association of its type in the nation. The list of all current members served as the sampling frame. The entire membership of 199 was invited to participate in the study with initial contact made by a cover letter and accompanying self-administered survey. A total of 124 complete and useable responses (62% response rate) were received. Respondents were 69% female (n = 85 female and n = 39 male).

The sample of graduate students came from two university programs with a long history of providing education for future leaders in the adult education profession. Both are large public research intensive institutions providing both masters and doctoral degrees in adult education. One was located in the Midwest and the second in the Southeast region of the United States. All students currently enrolled and taking course work in a graduate adult education program were invited to participate in the study. Initial contact was made by faculty and instructors who explained the purpose of the research and distributed the survey in class. As involvement in the study was voluntary the number of eligible participants is unknown but 71 complete and usable responses were obtained from both universities. The population of eligible students enrolled in both university programs is approximately 180, representing an estimated response rate of 31%. Respondents were 75% female (n = 55 female and n = 31 male). It should be noted that there is potential contamination between these two sample populations in that professional adult educators could be simultaneously enrolled in a graduate program. However, our interest was to examine if differences exist between those individuals either planning a career or currently engaged in the adult education profession who had made the decision to enroll in a graduate program compared to those not currently involved in graduate study.

The instrument for both sample groups was gathered using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Form (MLQ) 5x (Bass & Avolio, 2000). The MLQ survey instrument is widely regarded with excellent psychometric properties as confirmed by hundreds of studies from a wide range of international and organizational settings. This instrument is considered as being a highly valid and reliable method to determine the profile of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership characteristics of individuals (Northouse, 2004). Reliabilities, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, in this study exceeded recommended levels. The survey instrument consisted of 45 questions asking respondents to describe their leadership style as they perceive it. The MLQ instrument scores respondents' leadership profile on nine factors. The first 5 factors, composing of 20 items, determine the degree to which an individual is a transformational leader, the following 3 factors, measured by 12 items are for transactional leadership, and the last factor, measured by 4 items is for the laissez-faire approach to leadership. The MLQ5x also has nine items that address outcomes of leadership. These self-report outcome measures examine the extra effort individuals invest in their leadership (three items), the effectiveness of their leadership (four items), and the satisfaction gained from their leadership (two items). The outcome measures were not examined in this study. Responses are measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors: 4 = "frequently, if not always", 3 = "fairly often", 2 = "sometimes", 1 = "once in a while", and 0 = "not at all". An individual's score is determined by summing the items relating to the factors to produce a final score for each leadership style. This study reported the sub-factors recording a final score for transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership with higher scores

indicating frequency or preference for a certain leadership type. Demographic items were collected on gender to describe the sample and age to answer research questions three.

Results

An initial analysis of the data suggests that the adult education professionals and graduate students enrolled in adult education degree programs tend to describe their leadership style as being more transformational than transactional and laissez-faire. Means followed the same general pattern with scores for transformational leadership of 3.27 and 3.12 for professionals and students respectively. These means were greater than for transactional leadership (1.95, and 1.47). For the laissez-faire leadership style students reported a greater mean score (1.23) compared to professionals already engaged in adult education work (.79). These scores indicated that this sample of adult educators and adult education graduate students self-describe an optimal leadership profile.

An analysis of significant differences between the professional and graduate student samples found the greatest difference in mean score for transformational leadership ($p = .015$). A weaker, but still significant at the $p = >.1$ level, difference was found for transactional leadership. No significant difference was found between professionals and graduate students on the laissez-faire leadership style, despite the higher means reported by students.

Table 1. *Scale Means for Adult Education Professional and Adult Education Graduate Students*

Scale	Professionals Mean	Students Mean	t-statistic
Transformational Leadership	3.27	3.12	42.6**
Transactional Leadership	1.95	1.47	7.13***
Laissez-faire Leadership	.79	1.23	4.60
	n = 124	n = 71	

Note: * $p = >.01$, ** $p = >.05$, *** $p = >.1$

Conclusions and Recommendations

The implications of this study for adult education theory and practice are numerous as leadership will likely remain an important issue for adult education practitioners as the field continues to evolve and adapt to internal and external demands. Preliminary findings from this study suggest that both current and future adult educators tend towards a transformative leadership style more than transactional or laissez-faire styles. While these findings suggest a robust culture of leadership is present in adult education, a significant question becomes how this can be leveraged to enhance individual and professional development.

It is perhaps not surprising that professionals currently engaged in adult education work would self-report a higher level of transformational leadership. It is likely that the experiences of employment in the field contribute towards the development of attitudes and behaviors reflective of transformational leadership. Principally, the transformational leader tends to stimulate interest among colleagues and followers to view work from new perspectives tending also to generate awareness of the mission or vision of the organization. Transformational leaders also develop colleagues and followers to higher levels of ability and potential by motivating others “to look beyond their own interests toward those that will benefit the group and organization” (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 2). Therefore, an important attribute of transformational leaders is the ability to raise or bring influence on followers to achieve higher-levels of thinking and performance (Bass, 1998). Students enrolled in a graduate adult education program simply may not have the work context offered by employment in the field to identify and develop these leadership characteristics. However, given that the MLQ instrument measures self-report tendencies of leadership the actual engagement in adult education work would not necessarily be a requirement for the reporting of these characteristics.

The finding that graduate students report a higher level of laissez-faire leadership compared to practitioners is again potentially a result of the limited work experience that may characterize some, but certainly not all, students. The Full Leadership Development Model describes a laissez-faire leader as someone who exhibits minimal overt leadership traits and is identified by indifference and avoidance. Leaders high in the laissez-faire style tend to avoid taking positions on issues and also abstain from intervening and following up on decisions (Bass, 1998). Students may not have the life and employment experiences necessary to develop a more transformational or transactional

approach to leadership and therefore, show more tendencies towards the laissez-faire style. Similarly, they may not identify themselves as leaders and therefore, not identify that this leadership style would be ineffective.

The finding of significant difference between practitioners and adult educational graduate students on the transformational and transactional leadership styles may have as much to do with training as with experience from employment history. Adult education professional development opportunities tend towards providing leadership opportunities from the perspective of adult and continuing educators (Fleming & Caffarella, 2000) with less attention paid in graduate training programs. The majority of graduate programs in adult education focus on theories and models of practice related to the historical and contemporary underpinnings of the field, approaches to adult learning, and methods of planning, implementing, and evaluating the instruction for adults in work and community settings. The results of this study could be helpful in further assessing professional development in both graduate programs and on-going learning for those already in the field. The demonstrated effectiveness of transformation leadership in other settings suggests this as a significant leadership type for both group and individual development.

This research contributes to new knowledge in HRD, and more specifically in adult education by highlighting that a reservoir of transformative leaders already exists. As the field of adult education is often under-represented and undervalued (Brockett, 1998), the realization that both current and future professionals show a pattern of ideal leadership style may contribute towards the building of a stronger organizational and professional voice. One attribute of transformational leadership is an ability to bridge divergent interests and to articulate a shared vision (Bass, 1998) as well as to promote the development of leadership in others (Avolio, 1999). This study indicated that the field may already have a stronger unified leadership voice than many acknowledge. This could be reflective of the personal characteristics regarding leadership of those attracted to the field. Regardless, it provides a strong base for faculty and instructors in graduate adult education programs to further develop an awareness of leadership and structure opportunities, both within and outside the classroom, to enhance leadership ability.

Further opportunities for examining the development of personal leadership growth throughout and across the career are promising, raising the question: do adult educators become more transformed at the later stages of their career or are individuals who tend to show transformative leadership behaviors initially drawn to the field of adult education? Further study provides a benchmarking opportunity to chart personal and group leadership development. Additional study to compare leadership profiles of HRD professionals and students in graduate HRD programs would add a further important dimension to exploring the related disciplines that HRD draws and supports.

Of course, the results of this study must be interpreted with acknowledgment to the limitations, primarily the small sample size and reliance on members from one regionally based professional association. It is hoped that future studies in this area could use a larger and perhaps national population of adult educators. Yet, a strength of this study is the wide variety of locations of respondents and the fact that this professional association has members from a diverse range of organizational types and adult education settings. Furthermore, the well-established validity of both the Full Range of Leadership Model and its measurement instrument suggest that the adult education context could be worthy of additional attention to further both knowledge of leadership in the field and our understanding of leadership in general. The final limitation is the potential dual roles of professionals and students. In the adult education field this boundary spanning between professional and student status is potentially more pronounced with life-long learning characterizing the profession.

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