Elementary Principal Wisdom: Teacher Perceptions of Leadership

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how the five variables that measure servant leadership (Altruistic Calling, Emotional Healing, Persuasive Mapping, Organizational Stewardship, and Team Learning) impact on teachers' perception of principal Wisdom. Participants were from fifteen moderate-need elementary schools located in southern New York State counties. One hundred and sixty-two teachers responded to a 36 item survey instrument. A structural equation model was used to evaluate which of the variables influenced wisdom. It was found that Altruistic Calling served as a mediator of Team Learning and Emotional Healing. Wisdom is predicted by Altruistic Calling (β =.331), Persuasive Mapping (β =.195), and Organizational Stewardship (β =.424). The three variables accounted for 81.4% of teachers' perception of principal wisdom. It is recommended that organizations that are interested in developing principal wisdom invest their developmental efforts into Altruistic Calling and Organizational Stewardship.

Purpose

A principal strong with wisdom is likely to recognize the importance of his/her improvement in any of the other variables. Coupled with wisdom is the principal's ability to self-monitor and self assess one's own sense of their strengths/weaknesses.

A school leader will naturally assume at least one style of leadership. Before gaining wisdom, the school leader needs to learn how to lead. The type of leader that needs to be present to gain wisdom is the servant leader. A servant leader is someone who wants to lead by helping others first and by placing oneself last.

The purpose of the study is to analyze how five variables of servant leadership (Altruistic Calling, Emotional Healing, Persuasive Mapping, Organizational Stewardship, and Team Learning) influence principal wisdom as reported by elementary teachers. Wisdom plays a major role in decision-making. It also serves as an umbrella for each of the other variables.

Research Question

To what extent do the five principal servant leadership characteristics of altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, team learning, and organizational stewardship have an impact on the sixth servant leadership characteristic of wisdom?

Literature Review

Research and practice confirm that there is little chance of creating and sustaining a high-quality learning environment without a skilled and committed instructional leader to shape teaching and learning.

The modern day servant leadership movement was started by Robert Greenleaf when he published his 1970 essay, "The Servant as Leader." (Zahn, 2011). In his 1970 essay, Robert Greenleaf coined the phrase "servant-leader," which led to the modern day servant leadership movement (Zahn, 2011). Robert K. Greenleaf (1970) once said, "The servant-leader is servant first… It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first". A servant leader is someone who wants to lead by helping others first and by placing oneself last. Robert K. Greenleaf (1970) described several functions that are critical for servant leaders: listening and understanding, language and imagination, acceptance and empathy, foresight, awareness and perception, persuasion, conceptualizing, healing, and community building.

An essential part of leading a school through the lens of a servant leader is the use of team learning. Team learning is not a direct characteristic of servant leadership, but an associate characteristic. Team learning is vital to a servant leader within a school because it will guide the work of professional learning communities. The use of professional learning communities is a method to form collaborative learning within a school or any other organization. Professional learning communities have been used to foster change and improve school climate and culture (Senge, et al., 2000).

Within a school, a servant leader can have a positive impact on school climate, school culture, and all

stakeholders. If teachers believe that their school leader has their best interest, then teachers will support or "buy in" to new initiatives and changes. The hardest part of being a servant leader is building trust within a school building, but once trust is gained, the servant leader builds wisdom.

Wisdom is defined by Webster (1961) as the faculty of making the best use of knowledge, experience, and understanding by exercising good judgment. School leaders strive towards positive goals by gaining wisdom from all members of the school community. Leaders who display high levels of wisdom are very observant and anticipatory across all settings (Bierly et al., 2000). By being observant and anticipatory, school leaders can adapt and modify their plan towards shared school visions and/or goals.

Does knowledge and wisdom come hand in hand? The relationship between knowledge and wisdom is complex. Generally speaking, knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for wisdom. One would not be considered wise if one is not knowledgeable, but knowledge does not always make one wise (Bierly et al., 2000).

Before examining wisdom as it pertains to the principal himself/herself, current research emphasizes Wisdom as an attribute of an organization. In Mark Hanson's article, Institutional Theory and Educational Change (2001), cultivating "smart" organizations is one way to attain positive educational reform. Throughout this work, Hanson used the term "knowledge acquisition" (p. 639). He likens an organization to a person and references George Huber's work regarding the term. Huber commented "An entity learns if, through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviors is changed" (1991, p. 89). Here, both authors are noting the importance of gaining knowledge. Each writes about administrators and organizations interchangeably, highlighting the common thread that a strength in one area will undoubtedly, positively impact the other. Numerous times throughout each of their works, Hanson and Huber describe both the human and the organization gaining knowledge. Hanson also refers to the "human capital of people with the necessary expertise to exploit the intellectual capital effectively." (p. 638). This, in turn, illuminates the essential role that the administrator plays in an organization.

If a principal's strength is in the area of Wisdom, how exactly can this benefit a school organization? One way is to improve hiring practices. Baker and Cooper (2005) hypothesized that administrators who attended highly selective undergraduate colleges would be likely to hire teachers with a similar educational background.

Their conclusions were that this is especially true for high-poverty schools. They reported "Principals in high-poverty schools who attended highly or the most selective undergraduate institutions were 3.3 times more likely to hire teachers who attended similar institutions." (Baker, Cooper, 2005, p. 468). This is linked with the trend that they also discovered in their research "The distribution of principals by undergraduate preparation is quite similar to that for teachers...principals with stronger academic preparation are less likely to work in high-poverty or otherwise more difficult work environments" (2005, p. 453). If high-poverty schools attract principals of weaker academic preparation and they tend to hire teachers of a similar education, then it could be worth examining hiring practices.

Strauss (2003) is sure to note that the hiring process itself holds the potential to positively impact student achievement. The administrator's impact on this is indirect; he/she plays a role in the process but is not the most direct cause of the positive effect on students. Other variables related to the principal surely have an impact on his/her performance. According to an analysis by Papa, Lankford and Wyckoff (2002), there are a number of trends that began to emerge when examining some urban schools in the New York City area. They found that "urban schools are much more likely to have less experienced principals, and principals who received their bachelor's degrees from lower ranked colleges." Experience is also likely to play a major role in numerous facets of a principal's responsibility, including hiring new teachers.

Definition of Variables:

Altruistic Calling - Altruistic calling describes a leader's deep desire to have a positive influence and make a positive difference in others' lives. Leaders high in altruistic calling will put others' interest ahead of their own. An altruistic leader will go beyond the call of duty to meet others needs. Their ultimate goal is to serve (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006).

Emotional Healing - Emotional healing refers to a leader's ability to be highly empathetic and an exceptional listener, thus making the leader able to facilitate a healing process. The leader "creates environments that are safe for employees to voice personal and professional issues" (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006, p. 318). The leader has a commitment to and is skillful in fostering recovery from hardship (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006).

Organizational Stewardship - Organizational stewardship refers to the "extent that leaders prepare an organization to make a positive contribution to society through community development, programs, and outreach" (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006, p. 319). Leaders who display high levels of organizational stewardship strive to leave the organization better off than it previously was and seek to leave a positive legacy. Additionally, the well-being of the community is the driving force behind decisions made in the organization.

Persuasive Mapping - Persuasive mapping describes the "extent that leaders use sound reasoning and mental frameworks" (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006, p. 319). Leaders who display high levels of persuasive mapping are able to conceptualize and visualize greater opportunities and are able to clearly articulate these opportunities to others. Additionally, these leaders offer compelling rationales for others to do things.

Servant Leadership - Servant leadership is defined as an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization and those served by the organization (Laub, 1999).

Team Learning - Team learning is defined as "a discipline of practices designed, over time, to get a team of people thinking and acting together" (Senge et al., 2000, p.73). Where team learning is found to be present, efforts will move in a common direction, group members will understand and support one another completely, respect one another, and develop a sense of shared meaning and common purpose (Senge et al., 2000).

Trust - According to Nyhan (as cited in Hermann et. al., 2000), trust is the level of confidence that one individual has in another's competence and his or her willingness to act in a fair, ethical, and predictable manner.

Wisdom - When awareness of surroundings and anticipation of consequences are combined, leaders become able to pick up cues from the environment and understand their implications. Leaders who display high levels of wisdom are very observant and anticipatory across all settings (Bierly et al., 2000). Principal wisdom is defined as how a principal's faculty and staff view them as being a wise individual.

Methods, Techniques, or Modes of Inquiry

This study came from a larger study prepared by Zahn (2011). Participants were from fifteen moderate-need elementary schools located in southern New York State counties. One hundred and sixty two teachers responded to a thirty six item survey instrument.

The researchers used specific instruments such as Google Drawing, Google Docs, and Microsoft Word. To determine the evidence of validity and reliability, the researchers used SPSS and supporting research articles.

The research question sought to examine the relationship/effect five of the characteristics of principal servant leadership had/influenced the sixth wisdom. The researchers assert that wisdom is the most important characteristic necessary to be an effective principal. Therefore, our hope is that by exploring which variables have the greatest positive correlation with wisdom we can develop/look for those characteristics in current or aspiring principals.

This study was conducted in fifteen suburban, southern New York State elementary Schools. Subjects for this study were the five hundred and one licensed teachers (Zahn, 2011). Permission to complete the study by the Dowling College Institutional Review Board was granted prior to con-

ducting the research. All five hundred and one teachers who held a valid New York State teaching certificate in each of the fifteen schools were given the opportunity to complete the survey instrument. School principals did not complete the survey instrument.

An initial correlation analysis determined a correlation between principal wisdom and five other characteristics of principal servant leadership. The researchers predicted that wisdom utilizes five variables, Altruistic Calling, Emotional Healing, Persuasive Mapping, Organizational Stewardship, and Team Learning. A correlation table showed that altruistic calling was a mediator. Additionally, a partial correlation was used with the remaining pieces (persuade/organizational stewardship). A structural equational model shows how these variables predict wisdom (**See Figure 1**).

Results

When analyzing the intercorrelation among servant leadership characteristics, altruistic calling was found to be a mediator variable to predict principal wisdom. A partial correlation was applied to evaluate this phenomenon. After this, we performed two multiple regressions. One multiple regression was used to predict Altruistic Calling using Team Learning and Emotional Healing. The second regression was used to predict Principal Wisdom using Altruistic Calling, Persuasive Mapping, and Organizational Stewardship. **Figure 1** shows that Altruistic Calling (R squared = 66.9%) was influenced by Team Learning (β = 0.168) and Emotional Healing (β = 0.750). Of the two variables, Emotional Healing is the stronger influence on Altruistic Calling. The data showed that Wisdom is connected to Organizational Stewardship, Persuasive Mapping and Altruistic Calling. A Multiple Regression analysis was used to determine that persuasive mapping, organizational stewardship and altruistic calling influenced wisdom, showing an effect size of 81.4%. Organizational stewardship has the greatest influence on Wisdom, as evidenced by a βeta value of .424.

Educational/Scientific Importance of the Study

This study can be used to inform principal preparatory courses. Surely, if the credentials of the undergraduate university cannot be a factor, course content can include information related to hiring practices. Especially in high-poverty areas, it may be helpful to outline important factors/attributes of teaching candidates that are likely to positively influence student learning.

Individuals responsible for hiring practices within a district can leverage these findings. Baker and Cooper (2005) shared that "educational leadership programs might be wise to (a) recruit candidates from more rigorous academic undergraduate institutions and (b) pay more attention to test scores and other indicators of general intelligence." (p. 470).

Figure 1: Correlation between Servant Leadership Characteristics
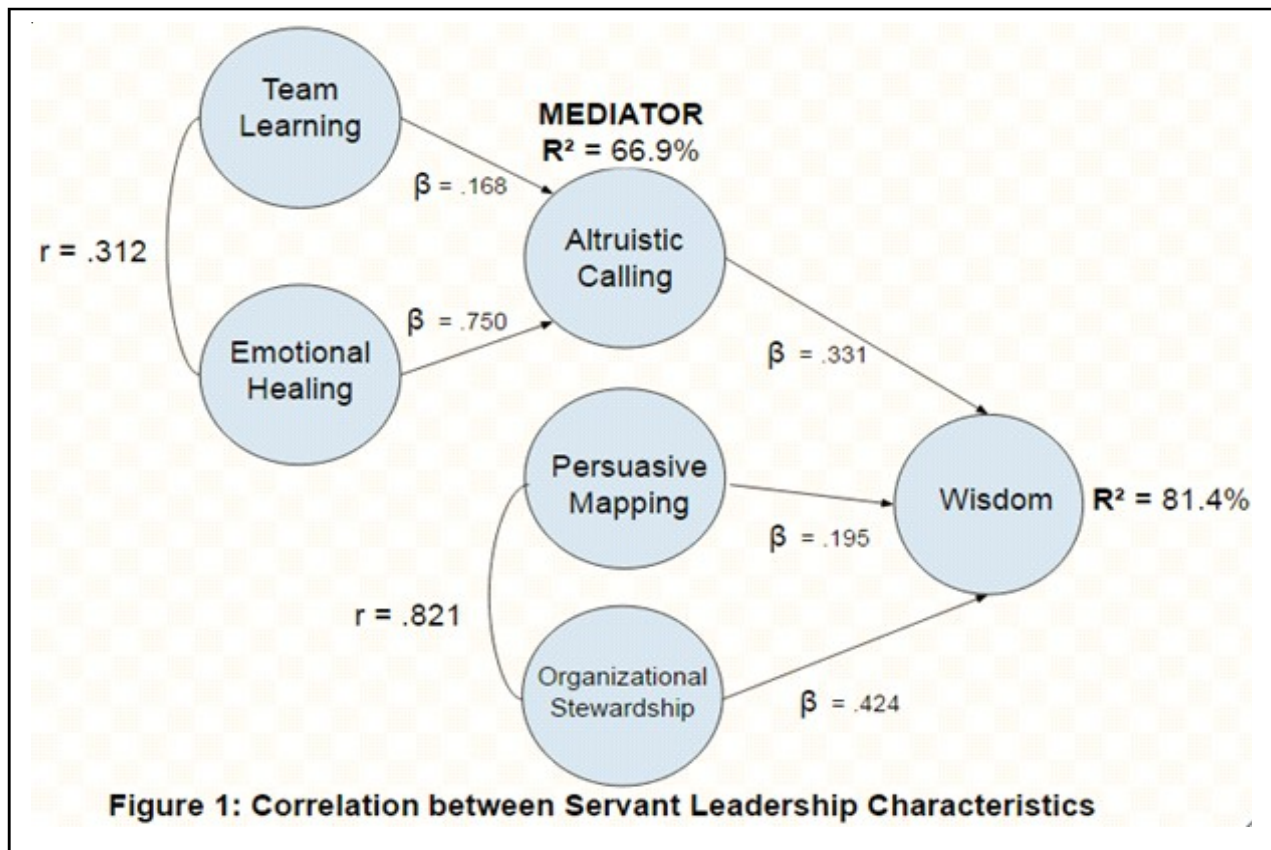
Additionally, professional development within an organization can build these skills in existing teaching staff. If the attributes sought after are effective for school leaders, then it will also be likely to benefit any teachers in that school. Future research can be done to further examine Organizational Stewardship and Altruistic Calling. By dissecting each of these broad areas, a researcher may be able to identify more specific facets of each variable that can be largely attributed to the development of Wisdom. These findings can help to further enhance the aforementioned areas of principal preparatory courses, professional development and hiring practices.

Within a school, a servant leader can have a positive impact on school climate, school culture, and all stakeholders. If teachers believe that their school leader has their best interest, then teachers will support or "buy in" to new initiatives and changes. The hardest part of being a servant leader is building trust within a school building, but once trust is gained, the servant leader can focus on the development of collective wisdom.

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