

A STUDY OF GRADUATE STUDENT ETHICS IN LEADERSHIP PREPARATION PROGRAMS*

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Abstract

The ethics and character of a superintendent is important and much research has been done in this area. This study attempted to take the instrument developed by Fenstermaker (1994) and determine if future superintendents have the same ethical response as current superintendents. The small number (n=20) limited statistical comparisons. Three research questions were asked: Do students in superintendent preparation programs make as ethical decisions as compared to superintendents? Do more religious students make more ethical decisions? Will a small number replicate Dexheimer's study? The students selected the correct ethical response rate 51% of the time as compared to Dexheimer 47.3% and Fenstermaker 48.1%. The more religious students did not have a higher selection of correct responses. In the 10 scenarios, the majority of the students selected the correct response in eight out of 10 scenarios.

1 Sumario en español

La ética y el carácter de un superintendente de la investigación es importante y se ha hecho mucho en este ámbito. Este estudio intentó tomar el instrumento desarrollado por Fenstermaker (1994) y determinar si los superintendentes futuras tengan la misma respuesta éticos como superintendentes actual. El pequeño número (n = 20) limita las comparaciones estadísticas. Tres preguntas de investigación se les preguntó: ¿Los estudiantes en los programas de preparación superintendente de hacer que las decisiones éticas con respecto a los superintendentes? Hacer más estudiantes religiosos a tomar decisiones más éticas? ¿Un pequeño número de replicar el estudio Dexheimer? Los estudiantes seleccionados la tasa de respuesta ética correcta 51% del tiempo en comparación con Dexheimer 47.3% y Festermaker 48.1%. Los estudiantes más religiosos no tienen una selección más alta de respuestas correctas. En los 10 escenarios, la mayoría de los estudiantes seleccionados la respuesta correcta en ocho de los 10 escenarios.

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2 Introduction

The superintendent position demands that a person be of high moral character, have the business and political savvy to run a multi-faceted organization. One key trait that is demanded of all superintendents is their integrity. In other words, do they have high moral character and therefore are trustworthy. This study came about because of the many superintendents who have fallen prey to the lures, traps, snares, or temptations and have made unethical decisions. A superintendent who is a coward, incompetent, bully, or follower will fall and we'll read about them in the newspaper as the "ex-superintendent."

This phenomenon is just not in the business of education. The Texas Youth Commission gave the following reasons for terminating four superintendents. These were policy infractions, failing to notify parents about a sexual assault, not following policy in disciplining an employee, inappropriate use of state resources, and interfering with investigation (May 15, 2007, Grits for Breakfast). Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) fired five managers for doctoring mileage records (May 26, 2010, Moskowitz).

Superintendents work in a job that is stressful and taxing. As Franklin Tucker of GateHouse Media (March 22, 2007) wrote, "Running a school district... is tantamount to being a baseball manager. One bad year and you could find you're fired." As with coaches, every few years at least one third of the superintendents are new to their current position (Tucker, 2007). Job demands, time constraints, high-stakes testing, accountability, and other job pressures influence the superintendent to make a decision that might not be correct or ethical. The superintendent is the loser and so is the position when they exhibit a moral failure or unprofessional conduct. The purpose of this study was to examine students preparing to be school leaders and their potential for ethical decision making.

3 Review of the Literature

The ethics of superintendents has been a topic of research for some time. Dexheimer's (1969) major hypothesis was there is a major discrepancy between ethical standards superintendents publicly acknowledge that are binding on them than what they truly observe. When the superintendent responses were compared with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) code of ethics, superintendents were selecting more unethical responses. Dexheimer's (1994) minor hypothesis was upheld for superintendents who worked in larger districts, had higher salaries, and had longevity in those districts. These superintendents were more ethical in their behavior. In 1994, Fenstermaker replicated the study of Dexheimer (1969). Further, Fenstermaker confirmed Dexheimer's finding that superintendents with higher salaries or in larger districts had more ethical responses. Fenstermaker found that females had higher ethical scores than males. Dexheimer did not do a comparison of gender in his study.

Superintendents are expected to have high integrity and be ethical. Gonzales (1999) concluded in her review of the literature that preparation programs must prepare school administrators to make ethical decisions as their decisions affect future generations. Gonzales concluded that people have not found the answers to what is good or bad and how to live their lives. It is beliefs such as this that will cause superintendents to make unethical decisions and have a moral lapse or no moral compass. She later concluded that school superintendents be schooled in the explicit understanding of right from wrong. From Gonzales' (1999) interviews superintendents defined ethics as knowing right from wrong, the Golden Rule, honesty and trustworthiness, and an intuition of knowing when something is not right. Honesty, fairness, integrity, trustworthy, respect,

¹ <http://www.ncpeapublications.org>

and openness were all descriptors these superintendents used to describe ethics. These superintendents stated that early influences, which came from family, developed their moral compass. Areas of frequent ethical administrative challenges are in expectations, personnel, fiscal management, board relations, and communications (Gonzales, 1999). According to Gonzales, the most significant ethical dilemma they had to face dealt with protecting student rights, disclosure, racial/ethnic balancing, betrayal of confidence, and personnel. The framework used by these superintendents in decision making was common sense, experience, codes of ethics, legality, research, politics, ethics of care, intuition, religious background, collaboration, timeliness, and universal principles.

Gonzales' study was consistent with Fitch (2009) who found that superintendent's experience was akin to better decision-making. His finding was close to Fenstemaker's (1994) study when he found that superintendents responded correctly to the ethical scenarios about 50 percent of the time.

McGown (2009) in her study on perceptions about honesty concluded from her research that administrators saw honesty and truthfulness as the same thing. Honesty breeds trust and high morale. Dishonesty came from someone having an agenda, some other motivation, or being inconsistent. Dishonesty breeds feelings of being hurt, betrayed, or disappointed. Educational leaders make numerous decisions and choose if those decisions will be based on ethics (Kaucher, 2010). Kaucher concluded from her study that effective leadership and ethical decision making are related. The top five characteristics valued most for ethical leaders were honesty, integrity, competency, motivating, and listening. "Honesty is telling the truth. Integrity is keeping one's commitments and promises. Trust is the foundation for an educational leader's effectiveness." (p. 2).

According to Gandossy and Sonnenfeld (2004) character and honesty are two traits demanded of bosses by the public. Fitch (2009) encouraged superintendent preparation programs to increase the training for ethical decision-making since superintendents do not always make ethical decisions on all decisions. He goes on to state that more experienced superintendents make better decisions which develops trust. The more the people know you and trust your decision-making ability healthy relationships will develop (Herron, 2009).

Klann (2003) stated that character comes into the picture when chief executive officers (CEOs) respond to ethical and moral choices. These leaders are presented with options and they respond to these options according to the foundation of their character which was developed through experiences in childhood/ adolescence, home life, schooling, peers, religious upbringing (or lack of), and so forth. Klann goes on to say that chief executive officers are responsible for the process of developing character, not only for themselves, but for their subordinates. This is done through which he calls the "5E's" (example, education, environment, experience, and evaluation). The character development process equals the right choice. The key is to know the difference between right and wrong and good and bad. Leaders might not make the right choice but are at least aware of it. According to Klann, character is a person's pattern of moral strength, fortitude (courage), and selflessness. Moral strength is related to the sense of right and wrong. Fortitude is courage and determination to do what is right regardless of circumstances. Selflessness is the ability to put everything before self and personal gain. Klann describes character as a heart. A person can perform with a weak heart but not for long. The same is true of leadership with weak or feeble character.

Roberts and Sampson (2010) asked students in leadership preparation programs the main reasons people lie. The major reasons given were fear/not get in trouble, personal gain, cover-up/manipulation, and to avoid hurting someone's feelings. When asked the last time they told a lie, 37% said within the last week. These students had feelings of cheated/betrayed and mad/angry when their administrator lied to them. A divergent finding was that 16% of the students felt it was ok for their administrator to lie to them. This tied into the question that the vast majority of them felt there were times when it was ok to lie. The students said the reasons people will select reputation over character are for prestige, money, greed, and ignorance. The students also said we should operate by "what is right" rather than by polls. The researchers concluded that honesty is an important character trait but it is situational. Students tend to think their district is more moral than the state which is more moral than the nation.

Ethics, integrity, and personal reputation have been found linked together (Neuman, 1996; McGown, 2009). Research is abundant as to the effect of poor or feeble character of the leadership on employees but all administrators have moral obligations as they affect the lives of many children. Ethical training for our

leaders also impacts student achievement. Hughes (2008) found a significant relationship between pre- and professional development training in leadership ethics for elementary principals and student achievement gains.

4 Research Methodology

This section provides the method by how the data were gathered and analyzed. The topics are: research questions, study design, study participants, and procedures for collecting data. The study was created to see if students in a superintendent's preparation program would have similar results as Fenstermaker using his instrument. The only change made in the instrument was the students were not asked if "they had experienced this before." Descriptive statistics were used for this study as the number was small. Comparisons between genders could not be made as in the original studies because of the small sample size. In the original study, Dexheimer mailed out 443 surveys and Fenstermaker mailed out 419 surveys. In this study, students in superintendent preparation classes took the survey in class.

4.1 Research Questions

1. When compared to superintendents in Dexheimers' study, do students in superintendent preparation programs make ethical decisions?
 2. Do more religious students make more ethical decisions?
 3. Will a small number (population) replicate the findings of Dexheimer's study?

4.2 Study Design

Ten questions developed by Dexheimer (1969) and retained by Fenstermaker (1993) were presented to students in a superintendent's leadership program. The questionnaire had ten questions which asked the student to select the most ethical response for the given scenario. The 20 students filled out the questionnaire in the class. An additional question was added which asked the student to identify their religious beliefs on a Likert scale of 1-5 with one being *non-existent* to 5 being *very strong*. Means and percentages were used in the analysis.

4.3 Study Participants

Twenty students in a superintendent's preparation program completed the instrument. The students were at various stages in their program of study. The students were either, principals, central office administrators, or teachers. A demographic section which included age, gender, current position, and size of district was filled out by the students. The students worked in Texas school districts. Seventeen of the participants were men and three were women. The age ranged from 31 years old to 60 years old. Five students were in the 35-39 age-bracket, six students were in the 40-44 age-bracket and five students were in the 45-49 age-bracket. The students worked in school districts ranging in size from 500 students to over 4000 students.

5 Findings

The students were asked to respond to a questionnaire that Dexheimer developed to determine the most ethical response for a given scenario.

Answer Key Responses Considered "Correct"

Most Ethical	Question Number									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
“Most Ethical” per Dexheimer	B	D	D	A	B	B	B	A	C	A
“Most Ethical” per AASA officers	B	C	D	A	B	B	*	*	*	C
“Most Ethical” per Roberts and Sampson (using percentages)	B	D	D	C	B	B	B	A	A	A

Table 1

Table 1 lists the results for the Dexheimer study, AASA officers study, and our study. For questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10 the students in the superintendent preparation courses, selected the same responses as the superintendents selected in Dexheimer’s study.

A final question asked the students to rate their religious beliefs. A Likert scale of 1-5 was used with 1 being *non-existent* and 5 being *very strong*. The mean for the student’s religious beliefs was 4.3. Forty-five percent selected their religious belief as *very strong*. Thirty-five percent said their religious belief was *strong*. Ten percent of the students selected their religious belief as *average*. Table 2 lists the religious beliefs in regards to each scenario question. Fifty-three percent of the students who selected *very strong* in their religious belief selected the same response as from Dexheimer. Eighteen percent of these students selected *none of the above, but rather*. This question was at the end of every question.

In question 2 (*You are attending, at district expense, a major national conference of school administrators (such as the AASA convention). While there, you meet a group of friends in the hotel lobby. After a few moments your group is approached by the sales representative of a product used by all of your schools. He mingles with the group and, before long, insists that all of you accompany him to dinner at one of the city’s better restaurants – at his company’s expense. How do you respond to the invitation?*), the major response was D which was *accept the invitation, but only if you are allowed to pay for your own meal*. The second major response was A which was *accept with thanks*.

For question 4 (*You are leaving the district at the end of this school year. The board, not wishing to involve itself with outside consultants, has decided to handle the recruitment of your successor itself, using you as the main resource of advice and help. After going through the normal procedures, a final group of five candidates remains. These candidates have visited the district, have met with the Board, and have chatted*

with you and other staff members. Now the final selection process has begun, and the board is asking for some firm opinions from you on these candidates. What is your response?), the students selected response C (any advice you give is restricted to comments upon the professional qualifications of the candidates, as revealed in the placement folders and letters of recommendation). Fenstermaker (1993) identified the correct answer as A (you excuse yourself and leave the Board entirely to its own devices in these final stages).

For question 8 (The Board has lately taken to adopting a number of “protective” policies for the district. Examples include: a policy requiring teachers to wear ties and jackets; A limitation on facial hair and requirements that all hair be neatly trimmed; Mailboxes may not be used for teacher association literature; and a statement which discourages teachers from taking an active role in local politics. You have not been pleased with these policies, and now you learn that one young history teacher plans to campaign as a candidate for town councilman. What action do you take?), the students selected A (Call in the teacher, try to discourage his candidacy, and warn him of the policy in effect) which was the correct response. The second largest response was E (none of the above, but rather...). The students had numerous responses.

For question 9 (Each year the American Legion, in cooperation with the Coca-Cola distributors, offers (free of charge) book-covers for the children in your district. Aside from the Coke symbol and a few patriotic quotations, they are unmarked and in school colors. The book-covers have been delivered. What do you do with them?), the students selected A (offer them to students on a first-come first-serve basis). The correct response C (send them back to the donor, with a note of thanks for the gesture) received the second largest response.

Finally, for question 10 (The competition for teachers, especially in the critical subject matter areas of math and science, is always keen. Because of economic conditions in your district (as in neighboring districts) salary schedules are generally below state averages. This, in turn, means you sometimes have to bargain with individual candidates in these critical subject areas, and the resulting salary offers often exceed what is called for by the local salary schedule. This puts the new teacher some dollars ahead of the already employed teachers of similar training and/or experience. This situation has come up again. Your chemistry teacher has left and the best candidate you have found will come but not at the salary the schedule calls for. How do you proceed to fill this position?), the students selected the correct answer A (Try to find some other way to make the job attractive, such as rearrange class load, unique fringe benefits, etc.). The selections of C (continue the search, hoping that an adequate teacher will be attracted by the salary your schedule calls for) and D (look at the current staff to see if someone can be retrained for the chemistry job, and thus make it possible for you to recruit in a less critical and less competitive market) tied for the second.

It was necessary to discuss questions 2, 4, 8, 9, and 10 as each of these responses received less than 50% of the correct response, though except for 4 and 9, the students more often selected the correct response even though it was less than 50% of the student’s responses.

Religious Beliefs Means to Correct Answers

	Question Number									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Mean	4.25	4.50	4.38	4.60	4.31	4.36	4.15	4.43	4.33	4.25
Percent of re- sponse for Dex- heimer's correct re- sponse	60	40	65	25	90	70	65	40	30	45
Mean	4.25	4.50	4.38	4.43	4.31	4.36	4.15	4.43	4.43	4.25
Percent of re- sponse as se- lected by stu- dents	60	40	65	35	90	70	65	40	40	45

Table 2

The question asked the students to identify the strength of their religious belief showed that the students who rated their religious belief as *very strong* selected the correct answer, according to Dexheimer 57% of the time but also selected E/F 16% of the time which was the response of “none of the above, but rather.” Students who rated their religious belief as *strong* selected the correct answer 57% of the time, and students who rated their religious belief as *average* selected the correct answer 70% of the time.

6 Conclusions and Analysis

1. *Do students in superintendent preparation programs make as ethical decisions as compared to Fenstermaker’s study?*

The students in the superintendent preparation program selected 80% of the correct answers, according to Dexheimer. This was very interesting as Fenstermaker mailed out 419 surveys to current superintendents and his instrument for this study was presented to 20 students in a superintendent preparation program. In only questions 4 and 9 did the students not select the correct response as their major response in accordance with Dexheimer.

According to the data, students are prepared to make ethical decisions. As Klann (wrote) the factors that make up your moral character are many and it is those factors that will guide their decision-making. Some of the correct responses weren’t as “clear cut” as others and making the correct ethical decision comes with learnings from professional development, superintendent preparation programs, experience, and superintendent colleagues. An example of this would be in questions 2, 4 and 9. In the responses the students provided for their “E” response (none of the above, but rather...), comes from lack of experience or knowledge.

2. *Will a small population number replicate Fenstermaker’s the study?*

Surprisingly, on the responses, 8 out of ten questions, the majority of the selections of the students were the correct selection. The portion of the questions that was not replicated was in two areas: due to a lack of

experience and professional development. Because of the small number we could not analyze school district size, salary, gender, or other factors as did Fenstermaker (1993). From this study, the data shows that students in superintendent preparation programs are prepared to take on the role ethically, but experience and in-service is needed in areas that are more gray.

Dexheimer had 1725 ethical responses out of 3630 for 47.3 %. Fenstermaker had 1341 ethical responses out of 2790 for 48.1 %. For this study, there were 102 ethical responses out of 200 for 51%. The similarities are quite remarkable. Student responses in this study had essentially the same percentage of ethical responses as superintendents in Dexheimer's (1969) study and Fenstermaker's (1993) study.

3. *Do more religious students make more ethical decisions?*

The data did not support this research question. All students were at least *average religious* to *very religious*. This question was asked because religion does play a role in decision making as it is part of our total moral fabric (Willower, 1997). Willower goes on to conclude that the practice of administration is concerned with values. Also, in the corporate world, religion does matter in corporate decisions making (Hilary and Hui, 2008). Ford and Richardson (1994) in reviewing the empirical literature found several variables that influence decision making and one of those variables was religion.

The mean ranged from 4.15 to 4.5 when comparing the response to this question to the 10 scenario questions. Also, students who said they were very religious and students who said they were religious had the same percentage for the selecting the correct response. Students who said they were average religious had a higher percentage of correct response but the number was very small and, in essence, meaningless. Religion is a variable that does define our character and mold our moral fabric. There are other variables that help mold our moral fabric and these are our up-bringing, peers, and education. That is why you can have very ethical and moral people who are not religious.

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