

Teacher Personality and Leadership: Exploring Potential Differences in Teaching Styles and Experience

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Introduction

This study was initially designed to examine for potential differences or changes in certain traits determined through an educator's teaching style and experience. The research focused on two concepts best discerned by the research questions; (1) can differences be observed based on a teacher's self-described teaching style, and (2) if these differences occur over time and through experience? Specific traits were determined by common leadership and personality models as defined in current literature. It is the assumption of the author that leadership is an integral component of the pedagogical process but it is neither static nor isolated to a single variable (Greenleaf, 1977; Burns, 1979, 2003; Bass, 1998; Northouse, 2004). Leadership is a function of personality, and can be determined through inherited or intrinsic characteristics. As a combination, these values and traits will develop unique to the individual and the context in which this action is defined (Judge & Bono, 2000). What may work for one person may not work for the next, even more so for public school teachers who labor under complex and challenging conditions. It may also be surmised that what may have worked in the past may not in the future, possibly to changes in personality and/or other intrinsic factors related to time and experience (Levinson, 2006).

These traits are commonly defined by adjectives or as general descriptions. For this research study the traits of personality and leadership were paired with the teaching concepts of directive and inquiry instruction (see table 1). Directive is a teacher controlled axiom illustrating a more involved teacher oriented classroom approach. Inquiry is more student-centered. Truthfully, the two are more idealistic than concrete or a set, well defined pattern or belief. Teachers will use one style or the other based on variables of the content being taught, class issues, students, etc. Though not static and usually somewhat fluid, many educators tend to 'see themselves' as being more, or leaning towards one style over the other. This intrinsic, self-observed view of teaching styles was then paired to leadership and personality responses to see if differences could be determined.

Perspectives/Theoretical Framework

The study was developed from a theoretical view of teaching based on non-pedagogical traits of educators. Leadership or more specifically, teacher leadership was one of the two primary frameworks of the study. Generally leadership can be defined through similar characteristics which commonly refer to the trait model. Another defining concept is goal achievement, usually referred to as the process model (Northouse, 2004). The American Heritage Dictionary states that the word 'lead' (conceived as a verb) means to "guide or direct" and (as a noun) as the "ability to lead" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1991, pg 79). Together the two definitions illustrate a person who has the capacity and the ability to guide others in doing or accomplishing a specific concept, task or function. Northouse (2004) stated that leadership "is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (pg. 3). This is similar in definition to that of teaching.

Classroom teaching can be seen as a process of leadership (Gardner, 1989; Schlechty, 1997; Sugar & Warren, 2003; Frost, 2008; Crowther, Ferguson & Hamm, 2009). The process and goal attainment models in teaching are similar to the traits for leadership. What is different is the organization of the leadership dynamic and the informal structures that teachers must develop to be successful. Two extenuating theories that fit nicely into this concept are the transformational model and the servant leadership model. The transformational approach attempts to influence or develop a positive culture which inspires followers to change and develop themselves beyond that of simple goal attainment (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985, Deal & Peterson, 1999; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2004).

For servant leadership, there is a morality or conscience component where the leader serves the needs of the followers and builds positive, meaningful relationships for the betterment and cause of all (Greenleaf, 1977, 2002; Bowman, 2005; Noddings, 2006). Both involve the construction of dynamic relationship through personal interactions, in this instance between that of the teacher leader and students.

Personality was the second framework of the study and like leadership is considered to be an integral, non-pedagogical component of classroom teaching. The American Heritage Dictionary defines personality as “the totalities of qualities and traits, as of a character or behavior that are peculiar to an individual or person” (p. 926). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-IV-TR, published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) describes personality in terms of describable traits that are “patterns of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and oneself that are exhibited in a wide range of social and personal contexts” (p. 686). Similar to the characteristic approach of leadership, certain personality theories also use descriptors in defining consistent traits.

Stronger and or weaker expressions of personality traits can define the classroom experience and will influence the leadership and teaching style of the teacher. Both have significant influence upon the teacher-student dynamic and culture within the classroom though to what extent will depend upon other variables such as experience and teaching styles. This develops the study, which was to determine if a correlation could be determined of personality and leadership traits towards certain teaching styles or preferences. And if there is, are these traits and preferences static or is there fluidity and change? Towards teacher education this can influence or determine different styles of teaching and management and (possibly) illustrate if these factors are behaviorally developed. The data can be useful in designing programs to meet experience levels and/or differences in personality and management.

Literature

Understanding, or at least being aware of, the interplay of teaching style, personality and leadership can be a powerful knowledge base or concept for teachers, administrators and faculty. The potential exists for individuals to understand, and possibly integrate, models of behavior based on these factors to help teach, mentor and assess individuals in all facets of their educational career. It is also integral to the teacher herself, in helping understand the factors he or she brings to the environment. Each educator brings different constructs of leadership and personality into the classroom; some will integrate and be successful, others may not. It is imperative to understand these factors and their relationship to the overall culture of the class, school, and quite possibly the district and community.

A common approach in teacher evaluation determines specific teacher traits and techniques considered ‘positive’ by the observer and/or the instrument being used. Many of these evaluation ‘forms’ are standardized and look for common adjectives or descriptors. Another common technique is the procedure of goal attainment. Is the teacher meeting the desired outcome through design or is it just an accidental result of multiple processes, not all of which may be under the control of the person initiating them? In other words, can actual success be more of an accident than a true outcome of the individual being observed? The assessment of teaching is primarily focused on student learning, which can be an accidental byproduct or outcome of pedagogy. In an Advanced Placement (AP) class does student success on an assessment really depict the successful pedagogical practice of the teacher? In a low functioning class where the majority of students may be special education, language impaired or at-risk; does a low pass rate for an assessment indicate a non-successful teacher (pedagogically speaking)? In assessing students we look at their own skills in relation to their peers, yet this is a singular, narrow focus and may not accurately depict the process as defined and initiated by the teacher. It is difficult to “see” good teaching so we assess its outcomes; the same is true for leadership. But an outcome does not always accurately define the process, limiting the research towards adjectives or descriptors associated with those considered successful. The trait analysis is common to both teaching and leadership; both similar in design to personality models which also utilize trait descriptors. Leadership and teacher trait studies use adjectives or descriptors that also are commonly found within personality research and all three may have commonalities that can be found within this strand of study.

Personality models have used descriptors or adjectives for years, primarily through the assumption that common language is the primary resource in finding or determining these traits.

Lexicon derived descriptors of personality, called surface traits, have become popular in recent years as effective measures of personality and research theory (Craig, 2005). These traits, usually referred to as factors, have led to the development of three competing models of personality; the Big Three, the Big Five (usually referred to as the Five Factor) and the Alternate Five (Zuckerman et al, 1993). These models differ from personality tests as they are generalized templates of an individual's overall personality dynamic, unlike the more specific assessments which tend to focus on one's needs, moods, or their possible states of anxiety or depression (Craig, 2005). These templates are reasonably easy to administer, utilize language and scales simplistic for self-analysis and due to their descriptive nature are compatible for comparison to other disciplines and models. Using traits to correlate with leadership has significance in the determination of the adjectives themselves. If personality is delineated from language then it may be safe to say the same paradigm could also apply to leadership and teacher studies. This correlates to the trait conceptualization versus the process definition, whereupon specific descriptors of individuals are looked for rather than an outcome or the process (Northouse, 2004). Using this approach allows the researcher to focus towards the use of descriptor words or adjectives, similar to that of the personality models, which can then be used for any possible correlation to all three outliers of this study; leadership, teaching and personality.

Method

The instrument was designed to be simple, unobtrusive and easy for respondents to answer (see appendix A). Consisting of a single side of one page, students were asked to determine the teaching style they most associated themselves. This was designed as a singular, closed response with either directive or inquiry illustrated; no other choice was given. The second task was for the student to choose from a list of adjectives they self-identified as their own leadership style. The third and final task was to fill out descriptors for their personality. Students were allowed to pick as many as they wished and spaces were left blank if they decided to add their own. The listing of the leadership traits was generated by a simple meta-analysis of existing literature. This was delimited to well known, albeit positive, behaviors closely associated with transactional and transformational leadership concepts. The list of personality descriptors was populated through a similar meta-analysis, delimited to literature concerning the Five Factor Personality Model (See table 1). This template is highly regarded and considered one of the leading instruments in modern personality research (Judge & Bono, 2000). Data was derived through descriptive statistics as numeration was nominal, limiting the means or techniques in which to quantify the information (Babbie, 2010). Responses were broken into the two sub-categories of teaching; directive or inquiry, and then the correlating descriptors were analyzed for any potential similarities or differences. Further delineation of the data was determined through analysis of the sample groups divided into their respective classes and/or level of education and expertise.

The sample population consisted of five different classes (N=115) surveyed in the spring and fall semesters of 2009 within a large school of education located in a medium sized, regional university in the American Southeast. Two classes were educational foundation courses, primarily populated with sophomores and juniors. The classes were randomly chosen and each was surveyed during a different semester (N = 49). Two classes of senior level, middle grades education classes were then surveyed, one in fall and the other in the spring (N = 44). These classes were entirely composed of first semester seniors who had completed all pre-conditional internships and assignments. The final class was a graduate level course consisting of alternative certification students as well as already employed teachers seeking advanced degrees and certification (N=22). The first grouping of students within the educational foundations classes were inexperienced towards any classroom settings with only ten hours of apprenticeship at the time the survey was conducted. The senior group had completed a month long apprenticeship within a public school and completed upwards of 100+ additional hours in alternating public school settings. The graduate class consisted of students already student teaching and (at that time) currently employed teachers ranging from one to ten years of experience.

Analysis

Data was analyzed using percentages of specific descriptors chosen within each allocated sub-group (see table 2). No weight or preferences was established, just frequency of response (of each adjective) was tabulated then compared to the frequency given from the other populations. The response was determined by class, not by student, with the top responses of each subgroup listed in percentages. The survey results indicated differences in personality and leadership descriptors as delineated by directive and inquiry based teaching styles.

The foundations classes, inexperienced with the actual concepts in practice, illustrated a higher percentage favoring the inquiry style (57%) of teaching. This percentage drastically fell in the senior class which was statistically equal in percentage with the directive style by teachers enrolled in the graduate course. Respondents also illustrated differences in descriptors chosen of both leadership and personality as determined by classes and differences in perceived teaching style. All three different sub-groups (freshmen, seniors, graduates) within the sample population chose somewhat similar adjectives but, as a whole, the percentages for each descriptor were markedly different. Differences were apparent within the sample population by each group and teaching style.

Leadership Domain

Differences in traits became apparent between the directive and inquiry groups though the disparity was more pronounced under the leadership domain. Students predominantly chose the trait of 'friendly'; 74% of the directive grouping as compared to 72% of those listing inquiry as their primary teaching style. This trait remained the most popular until the graduate class where it dropped to third place with a 46% (directive) and 36% (inquiry) response rate. This drop is telling; 9 out of 10 students with no direct teaching experience chose this adjective. Slightly more than 7 out of 10 seniors with limited experience picked 'friendly' while only 4 out of 10 students with direct teaching experience did so.

Respondents who favored a directive approach illustrated a tendency to move towards more assertive traits as their experience level increased. Though 'friendly' remained popular, the adjective 'authoritarian' increased in popularity, eventually becoming the most frequently chosen trait in the graduate class. 'Stern' was also picked by nearly three out of ten students, in direct contrast to those who favored an inquiry teaching style. 'Stern' was the highest response for the graduate students, though possibly semantics, this might also indicate a difference in perceived leadership style through the different teaching approaches. Interestingly, 'controlling' was only popular in the graduate, directive group. Nearly half of the respondents from this sample picked this trait, which may be attributable to a directive styled classroom leadership approach.

For those who favored an inquiry teaching style, the trait of 'open' scored in the top tier of responses garnered. Though dropping in percentage with experience it still remained the second most popular pick of the inquiry group. As with the directive group 'friendly' dropped as the most popular choice in the graduate class. But the same three traits remained popular between the sophomore and senior class while two of the three; 'friendly' and 'open' remained in the top for the graduate class. This was a far more consistent reply than with the directive students. All told the respondents in all three groups favored traits that led to a positive rapport with students as well as those that kept control in the hands of the teacher, despite differences in the two teaching styles.

Personality Domain

In the personality domain some interesting differences between the directive and inquiry based styles also became apparent. Also different was the limited or lack of change between responses of the three classes. Experience did not seem to make as much a difference in responses between the sophomores, the seniors and the graduate students as it did in the leadership domain. The same four traits; 'friendly', 'outgoing', 'personable' and 'humorous' were listed as the top choices for every group. There were differences in order and percentages but these were statistically minor and could be attributable to variances in sample sizes or semantic and scaling differentials. The only real difference was for the senior, inquiry teaching based group which had 'humorous' as a distant fifth in percentages; though this was equal in percentage with the other groups, just not equal in order or in weight. Overall the consistency was striking, especially in light of the differences marked in the choices for leadership.

A difference between directive and inquiry teaching philosophy did occur once experience was factored in. Though not as a major or highly ranked trait there is a specific adjective only found in the directive group and a different, specific adjective only found within the inquiry group. The trait of 'serious' was in the top listing for directive teachers in all three classes but was conspicuously absent in the inquiry group. For the inquiry students, 'assured' was listed highly in the senior and graduate classes but not seen at all in any of the directive groups. This is telling, the different choices reflect a difference in a personality trait specific to a defined teaching style.

Whole Sample Analysis

Differences were ascertained between the groups, their experience level and teaching style. It is not surprising that differences in leadership would occur as the experience level increased.

Students in the beginning level classroom, with no real experience in a classroom setting, tended to pick identifiers more suited to positive behaviors. This may be what they perceived as a beneficial construct from their favorite or most respected teachers as (possibly) defined through their experiences as students. As former, and for some, very recent recipients of the management concept, the students would possibly be more aware of the personality integers than of those involving management. As the experience level increased, the descriptors more suited to management styles that favor a teacher perspective began to supersede the friendlier, interactive and student favored behaviors. With the graduate students, some of which were experienced teachers, management focused themes dominated their choices. This is not surprising though some of the identified traits illustrated other, mitigating variables not previously seen or discussed.

Students that identified themselves as directive teachers showed a greater range in difference in responses by class and experience. This was not the same with the students listing themselves as inquiry based teachers. The directive students eventually moved away from the common 'core' choices of their undergraduate peers. The 2110 class and the 4030 class were basically similar in their top choices; 'friendly', 'open' and 'charismatic', the same three picks of the inquiry students. In the 7010 class, only 'friendly' remained in the top choices, 'open' and 'charismatic' were dropped for the descriptors of 'authoritarian' and 'stern'. This differed from the inquiry based teachers who kept the same three choices throughout all three classes. These graduate students did not drop 'friendly', 'open' or 'charismatic', though they did add the management descriptors of 'stern' and 'authoritarian'. This may reflect variances in management techniques as it can be assumed that the experienced teachers saw different needs for their leadership styles, possibly a more authoritarian style for directive and a less strict style for inquiry.

The personality domain remained essentially static though the percentages and weight given to specific traits narrowed with the graduate class. As the students learned from experience and through time their responses indicated a more level playing field with traits other than those associated with the adjective of 'friendly'. This descriptor chosen by almost 95% of the 2110 class was only at a 45% response rate by the graduate level, directive style teachers and was statistically equal to several other traits. The traits of 'outgoing' and 'personable' were similar in response. This was true for the inquiry students as well though the percentages for this style of teaching remained in the 70+ percentage range. Students obviously saw a need for these traits but the weight given depended upon their teaching style. Correspondingly, the directive students in all three classes chose 'serious' as a major trait, though this was not the same for the inquiry students. The inquiry group instead chose the adjective of 'assured' while their peers in the directive group did not. This probably reflects a conceptual difference in teaching styles and the perceived traits of personality that best works within them.

The difference between the leadership and personality domains was interesting as well. Though students, especially those with limited experience, favored open, interactive descriptors there were some differences ascertained through their responses. The core choices in leadership included the traits of 'open' and 'charismatic', both of which were conspicuously missing in the top student choices for personality. They were replaced by 'humorous' and 'personable', which along with 'friendly' were the consistent, or core choices for all three student groups in the leadership domain. For leadership, students saw being 'open' and 'charismatic' as important but in personality they saw 'humor' and 'personable' as the more important traits. It must be noted that no discussion of personality, leadership or differences in the two were ever discussed. Students discerned the differences on their own or through previous classes and experience, inferring important qualities for each in their own way.

Conclusion

Students who saw themselves as teaching through a directive style favored a friendly yet more controlled, centrally dominate loci of management as described by their responses on the survey. As experience came to bear the control issue became a more dominant theme or concern. Students still saw the need for positive and friendly behaviors but management factors are clearly a concern for the more experienced group(s). The same is true for the inquiry students who also indicated a management concern or focus but in relation to their style or type of teaching used a less dominant or centralized descriptor. This indicates a change in needs and perception over time and experience as well as a difference towards leadership and management concepts between the two teaching styles. Personality was seen in a different construct then that of leadership though this difference was not defined or analyzed in this study. Students indicated a difference in basic traits to either personality or leadership on the instrument.

Except for one, specific difference between the two different teaching styles, all the other descriptors picked remained the same, albeit with different percentages. Overall these choices remained the same through the different experience levels and classes, unlike that of the leadership domain. The directive students saw a more uniform pattern of traits with no clear majority or strong adjective amongst them while the inquiry students indicated a higher need for outgoing and personable traits. Yet the same basic adjectives were chosen by both groups. The main difference between the two was the inclusion of a different descriptor for each one; the directive style teachers saw a need to be more serious while the inquiry style needed to be more assured. Both choices reflect a difference in style and concept to the teaching paradigms the respondents saw themselves as following.

Overall this study indicates a basic difference in how students develop and understand their leadership and personality styles and how these changes develop with experience. Student responses highlight differences in self-identified traits in relation to personality and leadership with personality being more stable over time while leadership changed significantly. The analysis also delineates different levels of importance or weight given to certain traits, by experience, teaching style and a combination of the two. This is not conclusive and more research is definitely suggested but it appears that certain differences and changes are inherent between teaching paradigms and concepts and the experience level of those using them. For educational professionals it would appear that certain behaviors are more closely aligned to different teaching expectations as defined by leadership, personality, teaching styles and experience.

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Appendix A – Survey Instrument

Personality and Leadership Assessment Instrument

Circle the response which best applies:

1. Circle the teaching style that best describes you (choose only one)
 - A. Directive
 - B. Inquisitive

2. Circle the management style(s) that best describes you (may pick more than one)
 - A. Authoritarian
 - B. Friendly
 - C. Stern
 - D. Laissez Fair
 - E. Open
 - F. Charismatic
 - G. Controlling
 - H. Enter your own adjective -

3. Circle the personality styles that best describes you (you may pick more than one)
 - A. Friendly
 - B. Egregious
 - C. Outgoing
 - D. Personable
 - E. Quiet
 - F. Timid
 - G. Boisterous
 - H. Sensitive
 - I. Intense
 - J. Humorous
 - K. Introvert
 - L. Assured
 - M. Cavalier
 - N. Serious
 - O. Enter your own adjective
 - P. Enter your own adjective