

Identifying leadership practices for mentoring preservice teachers

Peter Hudson
Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

There are many forms of leadership and concepts of school leadership have evolved significantly over the last few decades. Mentoring is a form of leadership, where the classroom teacher (mentor) leads and guides the preservice teacher towards advancing teaching practices. What do school executives identify as their leadership practices and what leadership practices have inspired them? This study uses a five-part Likert scale survey with extended written responses that were coded into themes. These participants indicated they had leadership potential, which they associated with being organised, passionate and knowledgeable about education, interpersonally-skilled to build relationships, and visionary with action plans for improving education. These practices were also identified by participants as inspiring practices from leaders they knew. Generally, these participants perceived themselves as transformational leaders. Transformational practices associated with individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influences were agreed upon by 80% or more of the participants. Mentors need to understand inspiring leadership practices and identify their own leadership practices that may lead towards reflection on practice and, hence, a way to make educationally-sound changes in leadership behaviour.

Keywords: mentoring, mentor, leadership, preservice teachers

Avolio and Bass (2002) drew from Burn's (1978) theory about leadership to identify a full range leadership model that categorised into transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire styles of leadership. Transactional leadership focus on providing rewards such as promotion and increased salary for increased productivity. Transformational leadership centres on motivating employees and relies mainly on ethics and morals as key for either quality or quantity increases in productivity (also see Boseman, 2008). Laissez-faire may be considered as an absence or indifference in leadership. Avolio and Bass explain how strategies within these leadership practices can assist to determine the particular leadership style and possibly predict the outcome of such practices (e.g., see Trottier, Van Wart, & Wang, 2008).

Transactional leadership has extrinsic rewards for achieving goals (Avolio, 2004; Williams-Boyd, 2002). These rewards need to be considered valuable by participants in the process for the practice to be effective (Sashkin, 2004). Transactional leadership practices include contingent reward, management by exception-active, and management by exception-passive. Contingent reward associates rewards or consequences with levels of performance (Boseman, 2008). There is differentiation between leadership strategies when applied to circumstances such as mistakes that occur in the workplace. For instance, leaders who aim to find mistakes in employees' work practices take appropriate action by using management-by-exception active strategies, while those who address mistakes when they appear use management by exception-passive strategies (Avolio & Yammarino, 2002; Trottier et al., 2008). Aims within a transaction leadership include maintaining the status quo through an effort-reward system (Williams-Boyd, 2002). This leadership practice is generally criticised as limiting employees' potential by aiming only to maintain the status quo (Boseman, 2008).

Transformational leaders aim to move an organisation forward through employees' intrinsic motivation. The leader works with employees' morals, ethics and values to motivate them towards achieving as a team, rather than as individuals (Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003). Transformational leaders seek and embrace change as a way to improve an organisation's outcomes by developing the skills of the people in the organisation (Williams-Boyd, 2002). Employees are motivated by self satisfaction and an internal drive to do "what is best" for the organisation. Criticisms about transformational leadership include having little evidence that a leader-follower relationship within these practices achieves desired outcomes (Gronn, 1995). In addition, educators argue that there is insufficient evidence that this leadership can transform an organisation (Trottier et al., 2008).

According to Avolio and Bass (2002) transformational leadership includes: individualised consideration about employees' personal needs and abilities; intellection stimulation to activate employees' thinking about work performances; inspirational motivation that communicates expectations, visions, and future prospects; and idealised influence where leaders demonstrate performance and expectations towards a collective unity. One study (Kao & Hudson, 2009) explored Avolio and Bass's (2002) full-range leadership model where five principals' leadership practices and strategies were investigated through qualitative data collection. The study showed how leaders employ a combination of leadership practices and strategies so it was concluded that each of these leaders maintains an individual approach for leading a school. Extending beyond the full-range leadership model is the concept of distributed which is argued by educators (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001) as the potential for considerable influence on advancing work practices and an education system's goals.

What do experienced mentors identify as their leadership practices and what leadership practices have inspired them?

Mentoring is a form of leadership (e.g., Tillman, 2000). Similar to leadership practices within other settings (e.g., Hudson, Craig, & Hudson, 2007), the mentor as leader would: project visionary goals for the mentee, motivate the mentee to achieve high standards, promote collaborative team efforts, communicate a clear commitment to education, and most importantly, distribute leadership to the mentee.

Context

All leadership occurs in a context. This study investigates school executives' preferred leadership practices to guide preservice teachers' practices within school settings. Twenty-five school site coordinators (i.e., those who manage the mentoring programs for preservice teachers within their school sites) were involved in a three-day professional development program on mentoring for effective teaching. The three-day program included a range of topics focused on mentoring, namely: (1) Mentoring and the mentor-mentee relationship, (2) School culture and infrastructure, (3) The five-factor mentoring model (personal attributes, system requirements, pedagogical knowledge, modelling, and feedback), (4) Tools for mentors and mentees, (5) Problem solving and leadership, and (6) Action research for enhancing mentoring and leadership practices.

There were 23 females and 2 males with 18 of them aged between 30-49 years and 5 older than 50 years of age. Only 2 were between 22-29 years of age. All had supervised more than one preservice teacher previously with 12 who claimed they had supervised more than 5 mentees. Their roles within the school varied with 15 who were either principals or deputy principals, 3 were heads of departments, and 7 had other specialised roles in the school. Five participants had been employed in teaching between 6-10 years and 19 had worked in the education system for more than 10 years. There was one participant who had worked in the education system for less than 6 years. It was also noted that 60% of these participants had worked in their current schools between 1-5 years, two for 6-10 years, and 8 had worked in the current school for 10 years.

Methodology

This study uses a five-part Likert scale survey with extended written responses. Avolio and Bass's (2002) full range leadership provided a lens for investigating key leadership practices (i.e., transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire). Respondents indicated on the Likert scale whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements associated with the leadership practices directly related to mentoring a preservice teacher (mentee). For example, within transactional leadership a statement read: "When leading preservice teachers, I generally assign tasks based on the mentee's strengths and weaknesses". A transformational leadership practice statement was: "When leading preservice teachers, I generally celebrate the mentee's achievements". Laissez

faire leadership strategy was: “When leading preservice teachers, I generally avoid making decisions”. The raw data (strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, uncertain=3, agree=4, and strongly agree=5) were entered into SPSS for analysing descriptive statistics (i.e., percentages, mean scores [*M*], and standard deviations [*SD*]). “Means and variances for items scored on a continuum (such as a five-point Likert-type scale) are calculated simply the way other means and variances are calculated” (parenthesis included; Kline, 2005, p. 95).

Two questions were asked of the participants in an extended written response on the survey, viz: (1) Do you believe you have leadership potential? Please explain why, and (2) What leadership practices inspired you or didn’t inspire you? Responses were collated into themes as they emerged and frequencies of each theme were tabulated across the range of responses (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). The survey with extended written responses was administered in one room during the professional development program about mentoring and leadership.

Results and Discussion

The following analyses school executives’ self-identified leadership practices through qualitative and quantitative data. The school executives in this study were asked if they believe they have leadership potential and to explain their responses. Their responses were quite detailed, which may be indicative of their roles within schools along with the experiences and understandings they have about leadership. Six participants emphasised they had leadership potential because of their personal attributes for building relationships, including having empathy for people: “I am able to listen and understand people’s concerns, create an action plan and follow through and people love that I demonstrate consistency and I always do what I say and it’s practical” (Participant 5) and “Broad knowledge base, empathy towards others and desire to guide and for the success of others” (Participant 6).

Although many comments had underlying inferences about their passion for teaching and education, six executives stated this passion, for instance, “My passion – I really would like to spread it around” (Participant 17) and “I have a strong connection with people in my school community and a passionate belief about improving the lives of my students through education” (Participant 4). Several written responses honed in on achieving outcomes and goals within the education system. “Professional sharing (particularly in regards to progressive/innovative and non-traditional methods) with the goal of educational progress is something about which I am passionate and determined” (Participant 16). Another example is from Participant 9 who wrote:

I have a vision around what I would like to see happen in our school/education system and how I would like people to behave and operate within that setting. I know I can work with people of all ages to achieve/work towards this goal.

Two mentioned the challenge and satisfaction of being a leader. Others focused specific attention on improving students’ lives. Four noted they have knowledge (e.g., pedagogical and leadership) to guide teachers’ practices. There was further mention of being highly organised, projecting a

vision of education, and actioning visions towards achieving education outcomes, for instance: “I have the capacity to develop potential of myself through collaborative practice, synthesis of educational priorities, organisational and relational skills to drive change to improve pedagogy and student achievement” (Participant 22). However, there were also others who believed they needed to develop their leadership skills, to illustrate: “I enjoy being part of a professional learning community and discussing key issues and philosophies, although I feel I can be reticent / unconfident in leading others to achieve goals I believe are important to attain” (Participant 18). Participant 19 also stated, “I think that I have some of the qualities of a leader, which I’m hoping to develop with more experience”. While two clearly identified themselves as leaders but want to improve their practices: “I believe that as a leader I am constantly learning and seeking feedback in order to become a more effective school leader” (Participant 20).

Avolio and Bass’s (2002) full range leadership theory provided the framework for gathering data about participants’ leadership practices in relationship to mentoring preservice teachers. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse responses on the three key leadership practices (i.e., transactional, transformational, and laissez faire). These school executives had mixed opinions about their strategies associated with transactional leadership. For instance, there were three strategies assigned to the management by exception-passive practice. Waiting for problems to arise with the mentee’s teaching and maintaining the mentee’s status quo had very low percentages (4% & 12%, respectively) while fixing problems and mentee may encounter and resuming normal functioning was agreed upon by 76% of participants (Table 1).

Table 1: *Transactional leadership practices (n=25)*

Practices	Strategies	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Management by Exception-Passive	Waits for problems to arise	4	1.72	0.79
	Maintains status quo	12	2.64	0.81
	Fixes & resumes functioning	76	3.80	1.08
Management by Exception-Active	Attends mostly to mistakes	12	2.24	0.97
	Enforces the rules	68	3.68	0.90
	Teaches to correct mistakes	88	4.00	0.50
	Arranges to find something wrong	0	1.64	0.81
Contingent Reward	Provides support for required effort	52	3.40	1.19
	Exchanges rewards for accomplishment	64	3.52	1.19
	Ensures goal is satisfactorily met	100	4.60	0.50

* Percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with this practice.

Similarly, the management by exception-active practice also had mixed responses with low percentages on two strategies (attending mostly to the mentee’s mistakes and arranging to find

something wrong with the mentee’s teaching). However, most agreed or strongly agreed that they teach to correct the mentee’s mistakes (88%; Table 1). All agreed that they ensure the goal is satisfactorily met. Table 1 infers that leaders will use a range of strategies to suit circumstances. It also shows that leaders have a diverse range of practices that they will and will not use for leading mentees in their development. Therefore, it is difficult to categorise these executives as being transactional leaders, if indeed the strategies suggested by Avolio and Bass align with the practices. To illustrate, categorising a leader as management by exception-passive will not present the full picture of the leadership practices employed. Indeed, there were 88% who disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would wait for problems to arise with the mentee’s teaching, which infers proactive leadership and at the same time they do not want to just maintain the status quo. Fixing a problem and resuming normal functioning may not be seen by these participants as being exception-passive. If a problem arises an active leader would indeed attempt to address the problem and hopefully fix it. Resuming normal functioning makes this a double-barrelled statement, and effective leaders would hope for normal functioning but would also take measures to ensure this problem does not occur again. Table 2 focuses on transformational leadership practices.

Table 2: *Transformational leadership practices (n=25)*

Practices	Strategies	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Individualized	Projects based on strengths and weaknesses	96	4.40	0.58
Consideration	Builds interpersonal connections	100	4.76	0.43
	Encourages two-way exchanges	100	4.44	0.51
	Promotes self-development	92	4.48	0.77
Intellectual	Re-examines assumptions	96	4.00	0.71
Stimulation	Encourages the imagination	96	4.52	0.59
	Encourages to revisit problems	88	4.12	0.73
	Creates a readiness for changes in thinking	80	3.96	0.84
Inspirational	Presents an optimistic view of the future	96	4.52	0.59
Motivation	Moulds expectations and shape meaning	92	4.52	0.65
	Reduces complex matters to key issues	92	4.16	0.55
	Creates a sense of priorities and purpose	96	4.48	0.59
Idealized Influence	Exhibits great commitment to objectives	100	4.56	0.51
	Celebrates achievements	100	4.72	0.49
	Develops trust and confidence	96	4.76	0.52
	Expresses confidence in the vision	92	4.36	0.64

These school executives responded in the affirmative with the transformational leadership practices that may guide the mentee. Indeed, all strategies associated with the four practices (individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influences) were agreed upon by 80% or more of the participants. There was 100% agreement on four of the strategies, namely: builds interpersonal connections with the mentee, encourages two-way exchanges with their mentees, exhibiting commitment to the objectives for developing the mentee, and celebrating the mentee’s achievements (Table 2).

It may be argued that laissez-faire leadership is not leadership at all. All participants claimed they would not show a lack of interest in the mentee while only eight percent indicated they would avoid making decisions. Somewhat conflicting with the high percentages in Table 2 on transformational leadership, 32% agreed they would abdicate responsibilities (Table 3). Interviews or other qualifying data would assist to explain this apparent anomaly.

Table 3: *Laissez-Faire leadership (n=25)*

Practices	Strategies	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Laissez-faire	Avoids making decisions	8	1.96	0.79
	Abdicates responsibilities	32	2.56	1.19
	Shows a lack of interest	0	1.20	0.41

These school executives were asked what leader’s practices inspired or did not inspire them. Surprisingly, all participants focused on the positive attributes of an inspiring leader and there was not a comment about leader’s being unsuccessful. Each executive responded with more than one leadership practice that inspired them. Many wrote in dot points (which are shown where there is a semi-colon in the participant text) and others had detailed responses. Fourteen out of 25 participants highlighted the leaders personal attributes as being key to inspirational practices, for instance, “Maintaining a personal and approachable manner towards staff whilst competently completing the administrative role” (Participant 2). Participant 14 wrote that an inspiring leader has interpersonal skills to “inspire others to be the best they can be”. There were mentions of integrity, respectfulness, effective communication, and attentive listening skills as part of these attributes. Participant 24 wrote about a leader’s personal attributes to bring out the best in people:

Willingness to listen; their totally human qualities not just the ‘corporate line’. A strong belief in the potential of others around them and the willingness to give opportunities to other staff members – not just the big noters and noise makers of the group. Their belief in me.

While Participant 9 listed an inspiring leader’s various personal attributes:

Integrity; willingness to actively listen; to be included in decision making and vision discussions; trust; humour; made to feel valued; consistency of judgment and decisions and follow through; follow up and follow through; availability; consult with all relevant parties; strong positive relationships; willingness to have hard conversations and make hard decisions.

There were 12 who wrote about enthusiasm and passion as inspirational attributes. Participants 14 and 17 simply state, respectively, “Passion for profession” and “their passion and aspirations”. Participant 19 wrote about an inspiring leader she knew who showed “enthusiasm and energy, passion for their job, always gave their best, took time to reflect, organised, thought two steps ahead”. Inspiring educational leaders have passion for educational achievements, “passion towards the advancement of education both teaching and learning practices”.

Eleven executives commented on the leader’s capacity to be collaborative and supportive without bias or favour. For example, Participant 18 claimed an inspiring leader she knew was, “equitable –gave his team ownership and instilled a culture of collective responsibility”. Inspiring leaders have a “willingness/openness to ensure a shared or collaborative process” (Participant 16). Such leaders also support and “inspire others to reach high expectations” (Participant 17).

The professional demeanour of leaders was emphasised by seven participants, with “excellent knowledge/understanding of curriculum” (Participant 14). They also empathise professionally with staff and yet achieved goals. Participant 6 wrote:

One of my previous principals was an exceptional manager in that she was able to direct the school community in a professional manner and at the same time prioritise that her staff had lives outside the school that required recognition and attention. In addition she never failed to comment on your achievements and no matter how small.

There was strong recognition that an inspiring leader builds capacity within the school, delegates to ensure staff ownership of projects, and distributes leadership to manage the multiple tasks that exist within a school system. On capacity building, Participant 13 stated, “the ability to build capacity in the whole school: teacher aides, teachers and admin staff. Their understanding of communication skills – importance of valuing and listening, non-judgemental of the small issues, guide with the big issues”. Inspiring leaders have the “ability to make you reflect on your own practice” (Participant 14). Participant 20 also stated that inspiring leaders “provide opportunities for others to develop their own capabilities and delegate responsibility for outcomes and encouraging ownership”.

There were seven who commented on the inspiring leader as being highly professional. For instance, “Dedication as an educator, regardless of their position” Participant 17. There were six comments about the leaders being problem solvers and resolving issues, specifically highlighting the leader’s skills: “Great conflict resolution skills” (Participant 17). Five mentioned inspiring leaders’ high levels of organisational skills, yet they can make achievements appear relatively easy within the timeframes. “Her enthusiasm and organisational skills and the perception that she had enough time to do everything effectively” (Participant 1). Five participants also mentioned how an inspiring leader makes time to listen and talk with people within their very

busy schedules. Four participants commented that inspiring leaders project a vision and motivate others into enacting the vision. To illustrate: “Clear articulation of personal vision and values; ability to persuade and motivate others so the vision becomes shared - collaborative ownership” (Participant 20).

Participant 22 touched upon many of the points previously mentioned and other interesting perspectives on inspiring leadership practices, which her dot point notes included:

Academic perspective around leadership; conducting leadership workshops have inspired me and others; children come first; active listener; effective problem solver. Strategic thinking and visionary; ability to explore/develop capabilities of staff around them; transparent practices / open door policy; clear decision-making strategies; solid research / evidence / knowledge used in practice; valued people through - honesty, integrity, respectful in all interactions; high consistent expectations.

There were other leadership practices that inspired these school executives. Some of these included leaders having “astute perceptions of situations” and “inspired increased self reflection” of those within the school (Participant 15). It was highlighted that leaders who inspire “practice mutual respect” (Participant 23) and that “leadership is actions not position” (Participant 15). Finally, there were mentions of these leaders “being consistent with the ability to make tough decisions, and giving authentic feedback” (Participant 20).

Behaviour, including leadership behaviour, is learnt through modelling. Although notions of leadership have evolved over the last century, these participants outlined leadership practices they considered to be inspiring within the school setting. These practices included personal attributes, collaboration and support, enthusiasm and passion, building capacity, professionalism with students and staff as a focus, organisational and problem solving abilities, making time to listen, and having a vision for enhancing teaching and learning. These participant reflections of inspiring leadership practices may have an impact on their own development as leaders, as they aspire to reach a more effective leadership state.

Conclusion

This study examined school executives’ perceptions of their own leadership potential. Also, they self reported about their leadership practices and about inspiring leaders’ practices. In general, these participants indicated they had leadership potential as they were organised, passionate and knowledgeable about education, interpersonally-skilled to build relationships, and visionary with action plans for improving education. These practices were also identified by participants as inspiring practices from leaders they knew. Participants perceived themselves as transformational leaders rather than transactional or laissez faire leaders. Transformational practices associated with individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influences were agreed upon by 80% or more of the participants.

Mentors need to identify their leadership practices, identifying their particular knowledge, skills, and attributes that can inspire preservice teachers to advance their teaching practices. In this study, the leadership practices (i.e., self identified, transformational, and inspiring leaders' practices) had commonalities associated with a leader's personal attributes, professionalism, passion for the profession, visionary directions, and collaborative, supportive actions to build capacity within people. These leadership qualities for mentoring preservice teachers may be inspiring to the mentees under their guidance. Mentors need to understand inspiring leadership practices and identify their own leadership practices that may lead towards reflection on practice and, hence, a way to make educationally-sound changes to their leadership behaviours. Mentors who exhibit inspiring leadership behaviours can advance their mentoring by aiming to build the mentee's capacity for teaching in the classroom.

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