Could Developing Servant Leadership and Emotional Intelligence Be the Key to an Effective School Leader?

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Educational Leadership

Abstract

Today’s public schools call for a type of leader that can take a school through the high level of change and reform. Many elementary school principals are overwhelmed with their jobs, and the level of stress sometimes reaches the point of exhaustion. Research has shown that the leadership style of a principal is important to the success of a school. Servant leadership combined with emotional intelligence has been identified as strongly correlated. Moral conviction and a calling to serve others, along with emotional stability and sensitivity to the emotional needs of others, are the behaviors needed to empower an effective principal.

Educational Leadership Challenges

Governmental demands for school reform grow stronger with each passing year (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Reeves, 2006). In response, schools across the nation are changing their instructional and organizational structures in order to bring success to all students (Lezotte & McKee-Snyder, 2011; Reeves, 2006). The need for change derives from a variety of demands ranging from federal mandates, accountability through state testing, societal demands, family needs, and advances in technology, just to name a few (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Day & Leithwood, 2007). These challenges not only place demands on principals but also add more stress to an already highly stressful job (Caywood, 2007; Colbert, 2008; Fullan, 2008). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Race to the Top Act of 2010 continue to increase challenges, thus added stress. Colbert (2008) asserted that some stress is not harmful but actually necessary, and is a normal part of life. However, high
levels of ongoing stress are dangerous to a person’s health. Stress in the job of a principal has caused some to seek another profession. Others love their job, but claim the demands are too much. I conducted a study with the hope that the results would identify effective leadership behaviors that help lower the stress in the life of a school principal and bring success.

Lezotte and Snyder-McKee (2011) suggested that today’s public schools call for a type of leader that can take a school through the high level of change and reform. Many studies have tried to define the attributes that make a school successful (Frattura, & Capper, 2007; Lezotte & McKee-Snyder, 2011; Marzano, 2003; Odden & Archibald, 2009; Reeves, 2010). The findings showed that there is no one way and no one formula to improve the educational success of all students. However, there is an increased interest in defining what successful school principals do. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (1996) (ISLLC) developed guidelines for principals to follow in hopes of increasing student achievement. Today, principals have a new evaluation system with similar guidelines for success. Baker and O’Malley (2008) claim that research needs to continue to examine and define the attitudes, perceptions, and practices of successful principals.

Various studies showed that a very important variable in creating an effective school is effective leadership (Lezotte & McKee-Snyder, 2011; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Spears, 2002). Fullan (2008) described effective schools as those with leaders who display strong core values within the work that they do. Culver (2009) characterized effective school leaders as those who have strong core values in their inner lives, which create a moral purpose around what they do. Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) identified the core values that define effective school leaders as ethical behavior and caring for others. Lashway (2003) claimed the following:

Moral leadership has been a persistent theme in recent debates over the principal’s role. While conceptions of the leader’s responsibility differ widely, most discussion centers not on the need for personal ethical behavior (which is
usually assumed), but on the importance of creating schools that serve a moral purpose. (p. 8)

**Servant Leadership in Education**

Greenleaf’s (1991) study on leadership revealed a need for a better approach to leadership, in which he identified the leader as a servant of those they lead. He described servant leadership with words such as caring, compassion, empathy, listening, and encouragement (Greenleaf, 1996). Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) extended Greenleaf’s definition of servant leadership, defining it as being about the heart of the leader. They described the effective leader as caring and compassionate and viewing his or her role as meeting the needs of all stakeholders. Blanchard and Hodges (2003) defined the servant leader as a person whose intent is to serve others in order to make a better world. Culver (2009), Baker and O’Malley (2008), Fullan (2008), and Hunter (2004) described effective leadership as caring for those they lead and humility in what they do.

Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson, and Jinks (2007) conducted a study looking at the practices of principals identified with servant leadership characteristics. Their findings showed that these principals who displayed servant leadership were more effective than the leaders with different styles of leadership. Fullan (2003) outlined the components of effective leadership: having moral purpose, understanding the change process, building relationships, creating and sharing knowledge, and making coherence. Trilling and Fadel (2009) and Crippen (2007) suggested that the one key factor in developing effective school reform is a school with a principal who demonstrates servant leadership behavior.

According to Reason (2010), in order to accomplish lasting reform in schools, leaders need to have emotional intelligence, specifically the skill of emotional resiliency. Emotional resiliency refers to one’s ability to adapt to stressful situations, hold on to positive emotions, and continue in their work (Reason, 2010). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002), stated that complex times call for emotionally intelligent leaders, which
they defined as those having the ability to recognize others’ emotions as well as their own and to regulate their actions according to circumstances. According to Collins (2001) and other researchers (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008; Senge, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1992; Spears, 2004), leadership is hard work because it involves an understanding of human nature and emotion.

Goleman (2006) described emotional intelligence as an intelligence model that allows a person to have the capacity to understand, perceive, and manage his or her emotions. Servant leadership is a practice and philosophy of leadership that is first concerned with serving all stakeholders, thus empowering them to identify and achieve the goals of the community (Wheatley, 2005). Spencer (2007) described the foundation of the servant leader as self-awareness. He suggested a leader must first have a solid understanding of self in order to serve others. Research has established that emotionally intelligent leaders (Cherniss, Extein, Goleman, & Weissberg, 2006; Wheatley, 2005) and servant leaders (Culver, 2009; Sipe & Frick, 2009) have a positive impact on the performance of their organization, but research on the correlation of emotional intelligence and servant leadership specific to leaders of elementary schools is still evolving. Collins (2001) discussed motivating staff to create the best school for students through a servant leadership style and the principal’s ability to cope with the demands and pressures of the job through his or her level of emotional intelligence. Collins (2001) also discussed the possibility of a relationship between emotional intelligence and servant leadership within the companies that he identified as developing from being good to great.

Marzano and Waters (2009) claimed that if schools are going to have true lasting reform, there is a need to abandon the traditional leadership skills and behaviors, and instead define the skills, behaviors, and emotions that will bring lasting change and success to schools. Traditional principal leadership training programs focus on the cognitive skills needed, but this training may not be enough to give the principal all the tools he or she needs to move a school to lasting successful change (Wallace Foundation, 2007). No longer can principals depend only on their cognitive skills to bring success to their schools, but they must also develop leadership strategies and behaviors
that define what they do and who they are. A better understanding of the traits and skills of effective principals is needed, and because of this, I conducted a study that looked at the relationship between servant leadership practice and emotional intelligence as it related to school principals.

Motivating staff to create the best school for students through a servant leadership style and the principal’s ability to cope with the demands and pressures of the job was proposed in my study. Because servant leadership has been shown to be an effective way in which to lead a school (Black, 2007; Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson & Jinks, 2007) and emotional intelligence has been identified as necessary for improving leadership in an organization (Alston, 2009; Bardach, 2008; Cherniss & Caplan, 2001), it seemed important to investigate the relationship of the two within the role of a school principal. I conducted a quantitative, correlational study to examine if a relationship existed between teacher perceptions of emotional intelligence and servant leadership of the principal and the self-reported principal perceptions of their servant leadership and emotional intelligence behavior within elementary schools across Washington State. My study specifically examined the relationship between the elementary school principals’ self-perception of their own degree of servant leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence and the emotional intelligence and servant leadership behaviors of the principals as rated by their teachers within their school building. An analysis was also conducted to determine which sub-constructs contributed most strongly to the relationship between emotional intelligence and servant leadership among the principals.

There are many factors that determine the need for strong leadership in the school system (O’Donnell & White, 2005). The job of a principal carries a high level of responsibility to the students, the teaching staff, the support staff, the parents, the central office administrative staff, the community, and society (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008). All leaders face challenges, however, principals have a special set of challenges that are not found within other organizations. Principals must focus on accountability reform that calls for all students to pass the state testing, to analyzing and identifying
areas that need improvement, and then facilitating the change needed (Reeves, 2006). Moore (2009) claimed that the task of restructuring a school calls for principals who are skilled in monitoring their own feelings in order to guide their actions. Mulford, Silins, and Leithwood (2004) claimed that the society we have and will have in the future is largely created in schools. He asserted that schools are the only institution that partners with the institution of family in the development of lifelong learning both academically and socially. The most important investment in society is seen as the education of its people, and without it, a society suffers (Mulford, Silins, & Leithwood, 2004). Principals have an enormous amount of responsibility.

The empirical literature on effective leadership in schools identified over 121 school leadership practices and standards (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2002). These long lists raise a concern with the description of the role of the school leadership. According to Day and Leithwood (2007), they are impossible to fulfill and unrealistic to follow. Day and Leithwood defined these lists as mythological because they are unattainable ideals for one person. My research raised the question: Is servant leadership and its relationship with emotional intelligence a positive leadership style for a school principal?

My quantitative study examined elementary principals’ self-reported emotional intelligence scores and servant leadership scores and their teachers’ assessments of the principals’ servant leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence behaviors. The information explains the correlations found between the independent variable of emotional intelligence and the dependent variable of servant leadership behaviors among these elementary principals. This study did not suggest that one variable caused the other, even if there was a strong relationship between the variables (Creswell, 2009). The participants in this study consisted of elementary principals from school districts in Washington State, along with teachers from each principals’ building. Two surveys for principals and two surveys for teachers were used to collect the data. The teachers received observer-rated versions of both of the surveys to measure their principals’ servant leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence. My study
determined the relationship that existed between servant leadership and emotional intelligence in the principals’ self-rating and the teachers’ ratings of their principal’s demonstration of servant leadership and emotional intelligence behaviors.

The data revealed that the principals’ perceived themselves strong in both emotional intelligence and servant leadership behaviors. The teachers also viewed their principals strong in all areas of servant leadership behavior and emotional intelligence The highest score in the emotional intelligence scale was in Use of Emotion, and the highest score in the servant leadership factors was in Open/Participatory (delegating responsibility and nurturing participatory leadership). Self-Emotional Appraisal is the ability to monitor one’s own emotional state and manage one’s emotions; it is self-awareness and self-reflection of emotions (Goleman, 2002). With added pressure for reform being a common experience for principals, it was interesting to see the highest score by the principal ratings was in this area (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Others’ Emotional Appraisal refers to recognizing and responding to the emotional states of others for the purpose of building relationships; teachers felt their principals did this. Research shows that relationship is what is needed in order to move a staff toward change (Lezotte & McKee-Snyder, 2011; Marzano, 2003). The twenty-first century schools are being asked to make significant changes, and that job rests on the shoulders of the principal. Bloom (2004) claimed that if a principal was going to be effective, he or she must first build and maintain positive relationships with the employees.

I conducted a Pearson correlation analysis to determine whether there was a correlation between the subscales of emotional intelligence and the seven factors of servant leadership. The subgroup factors of servant leadership are (1) Developing and Empowering Others, (2) Vulnerability and Humility, (3) Authentic Leadership, (4) Open/Participatory Leadership, (5) Inspiring Leadership, (6) Visionary Leadership, and (7) Courageous Leadership. The subgroups of emotional intelligence are Self-Emotional Appraisal (Scale 1), Others’ Emotional Appraisal (Scale 2), Use of Emotion (Scale 3), and Regulation of Emotion (Scale 4).
Within the study, the principals’ self-ratings of the emotional intelligence scales and the seven factors of servant leadership displayed that all correlations showed a direct positive relationship and twenty-six of the thirty-five correlations were significant. Two of the significant correlations were related to the servant leadership factor Developing and Empowering Others, which suggests that when the leader gives up power of position he/she gains the power of relationship and thus becomes more effective, this correlated with all four of the emotional intelligence scores. Salovey and Mayer (1990) proposed that the overall character of emotional intelligence was empathy. They define *empathy* as understanding others’ feelings and then actually experiencing those feelings. They continued to say that the individual who could understand and sense the feelings of others was then able to develop emotional relationships with others, which was a part of developing close relationships. Servant leaders care about the feelings of others and show this by delegating and nurturing more power to the followers. Having empathy, understanding others’ feelings, correlates with the servant leader’s ability to build another’s self-confidence.

The highest significant correlation was the servant leadership Factor 1, Developing and Empowering Others, and emotional intelligence Scale 2, Others’ Emotional Appraisal, which relates to an individuals’ ability to perceive and understand the emotions of the people around them. Again, leaders who rate highly in this ability are known to be very sensitive to the emotions of others as well as able to predict others’ emotional responses (Law, Wong, & Song, 2004). Developing and Empowering Others in correlation with Others’ Emotional Appraisal seems like two likely fits, as developing others would require the ability on the part of the leader to build relationships with his or her followers and the principal would need to see leadership as a responsibility and influence, not a position (Page & Wong, 2000; Reason, 2010). Overall, the teachers’ ratings of their principal also showed a significant correlation between the principals’ servant leadership style and levels of emotional intelligence. Open/Participatory, Developing and Empowering Others, and Inspiring Leadership were significantly strong
in their correlation to Others’ Emotional Appraisal and total emotional intelligence scores.

The strongest and most compelling finding in this study was the significant positive correlation of the teachers’ ratings of their principals and the significant correlation of servant leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence. My study suggested the fact that the teachers’ data showed stronger and more significant correlations than the principals’ data was a great indication that the data was correct. The teachers in this study saw their principal as strong in both servant leadership and emotional intelligence with thirty-four of thirty-five constructs being significant. It was interesting that within the five largest, most significant correlations four servant leadership factors correlate with Scale 2 of emotional intelligence, Others’ Emotional Appraisal. The four servant leadership factors are Open/Participatory, Developing and Empowering Others, Authentic Leadership, and Inspiring Leadership.

These findings seem to display Wong and Page’s (2003) model of servant leadership that captures the connection of the framework; the heart of the servant, who they are; the reason they want to lead, to develop others; the method of how they lead, involving others; the impact they have as a leader, inspiring and influencing; and how others see them, modeling of authentic leadership. Russell and Stone (2002) stated that each function of servant leadership is distinct, but the functions of servant leadership also seemed too interrelated. My findings supported the literature that suggested servant leadership behavior connects to emotional intelligence (Beatty, 2007; Hannay & Fretwell, 2010; Parolini, 2005; Russell & Stone, 2002; Winston & Hartsfield, 2004; Waddell, 2008). Results from my study revealed that the application of servant leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence show promise to elementary school principal development, as both principals and teachers significantly correlated constructs of both.

Now the question arises—so what? The results of my study seem to lead to the perception that emotional intelligence has much to do with the practice of servant leadership. An area of importance in the field of education may be the inclusion of
servant leadership principles combined with emotional intelligence behaviors in educational administration preparation programs. The research showed that the principal’s ability to recognize and manage his or her own emotions along with those of others and to use this understanding to effectively build relationships with teachers was an important correlation with servant leadership behaviors.

Beatty (2007) suggested that principals are the ones to establish a culture that desires to learn together, and it is done through their emotional signals and emotional meaning making. Bloom (2004) and Moore (2009) claimed that principals’ succeeding or not relates to their level of emotional intelligence, as all of their actions and words are closely examined by the staff and community. Moore (2009) suggested that principals need support in learning to deal with conflict that comes with implementing and leading school reform by creating high levels of emotional intelligence on the part of the principal. As Beatty stated, leadership that is practiced with a view to re-culturing our schools needs to occur through connecting with self and with others, one relationship at a time. The links between lived experiences of emotion and power, real and imagined, provide fertile ground upon which professionals can begin to understand themselves and each other and their social emotional contests in new ways (Beatty, 2007, p. 337).

Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr’s (2010) research on exemplary principal preparation programs suggests that programs need to center on problem-based learning and that the behaviors of principals are the number one factor and the beginning base for creating effective programs, thus effective principals. They also stated that there is not a shortage of principals, but there are not enough principals who have the heart that calls them to want to work in schools that are challenging.

Various studies have revealed that servant leadership was a successful behavior for school principals (Black, 2007; McClellan, 2008; Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson, & Jinks, 2007). Cherniss (2000) suggested that emotional intelligence has been studied as early as 1940, when researchers suggested that the noncognitive aspect of intelligence was important. In 1990, Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence* helped to ignite a number of research projects around the effect of emotional intelligence in the life of a leader.
Today, there are studies that have been conducted that recognize the positive effects that emotional intelligence has on the school principal (Bardach, 2008; Herbert, 2010; Wells, 2010). My study demonstrated that the combination of the two has the potential to alter the behaviors of school principals, with leadership behaviors such as listening, caring for others, and building relationships combined with emotional intelligence behaviors such as creating an emotionally safe place for learning and growing as a community and creating relationships so that there is a partnership within a learning community. Bradberry and Greaves (2009) suggested that teaching skills to manage emotions for challenging situations is of number one importance, but something lacking in leadership preparation programs.

One suggestion in response to the results is to provide emotional intelligence and servant leadership coaching programs to current principals who are struggling within their role of leadership and when hiring principals, develop question criteria and assessment that includes and focuses on servant leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence. Blanchard and Hodges (2003) suggested that if leaders wish to become servant leaders, they must evaluate their behavior in order to see what changes are required in their thinking in order to become a servant leader. They also proposed that the way to recognize the difference between a self-serving leader and a servant leader was how they handle feedback. Servant leadership suggests that feedback is a gift (Blanchard & Hodges; 2007). A servant leader welcomes and uses feedback to improve. This takes the ability to handle one’s emotions in order to see feedback as a positive thing and to respond in a positive way, which correlates to Mayer, Salovey and Caruso’s (2004) definition of emotional intelligence; having the ability to perceive emotions and to allow that to guide a person’s actions, which are the two components of emotional intelligence: awareness and management of emotions.

Another suggestion is having principals use the surveys in my study, to gain insight about their own personal levels of emotional intelligence and their servant leadership behaviors. This would give them information in order to examine the gaps between how they are viewed by their teachers and their own personal evaluation of themselves. The
results could be valuable to the principals who desire to implement servant leadership and emotional intelligence into their leadership practice. The information would reveal to them where they need to grow and improve. Bradberry and Greaves (2009) suggested that emotional intelligence is something that needs to be learned and practiced on consistent bases. They describe self-awareness as understanding what makes a person tick, why certain things bring positive or negative reactions. They also suggested that with practice, anyone can become better skilled at managing and understanding emotions, and the more time spent on practicing, the quicker it is learned and incorporated. They continued to state that people who are emotionally ignorant about how emotions affect them and others would have a difficult time being successful in their leadership.

Reason (2010) proclaimed that a leader who first works at monitoring their own emotions can develop a powerful school culture that brings out characteristics of emotions such as trust, determination, and courage. With the significant high scores in the descriptive statistics from the teachers on their principals’ emotional intelligence and servant leadership behaviors and the high scores on the teachers’ rated relationships of these two variables within the principals’ behaviors, this study implied that the teachers supported their principals, which also would suggest that principals with high levels of servant leadership and emotional intelligence create a culture where teachers feel supported. Fullan (2003) purported that having a strong, positive culture means much more than just safety and order. Fullan (2008) described school culture, as the values, beliefs, and traditions that are formed together over time. Seven of Marzano’s (2003) effective leadership traits have a common focus, which are creating and aligning the feelings, beliefs, shared purpose, and values of the stakeholder involved in the school system. School culture, according to Marzano, incorporates a feeling of well-being, purposefulness, shared vision of what the school could be, and the core values shared by everyone. Lashway (2003) claimed that principals who desire to improve and build an effective school culture create an environment that develops a shared vision and encourage shared responsibility and authority. Fullan (2008)
suggested that a challenge for the leader is being able to draw out each person’s values and views so that common vision, action plans, and goals are created through each person’s thoughts and talents.

**Summary**

My study implied that the correlation of servant leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence might also be highly effective in developing a culture that aligns values and vision of purpose and mission. Again, Kouzes and Posner (2007) described the position of a school principal as one that comes with a great deal of stress. McClellan (2008) also discovered in his study that servant leaders have a higher stress level than nonservant leaders, and he suggested that servant leadership alone might not be enough. Spencer’s (2007) description of servant leadership is that it is emotionally demanding; he suggested that it may require the leader to use emotional intelligence in order to implement servant leadership attributes. Blanchard and Hodges (2003) suggested that servant leadership is not a stand-alone leadership but is intended to blend the heart of the servant leader with leadership skills. The findings of this study demonstrated that servant leadership combined with emotional intelligence is strongly correlated within the setting of the elementary school principals surveyed. Reason (2010) suggested that principals need the skill of emotional resiliency when it comes to bringing the reform that is needed in schools. He suggests that a leader who has positive emotional levels is needed in order to improve learning for all. Because the leadership style of a principal is important to the success of a school, servant leadership factors combined with emotional intelligence scales are identified in this study as strongly correlated in the leadership of elementary school principals: 97 percent of the constructs (34 out of 35) correlated significantly in the teachers’ ratings of servant leadership (SL) and emotional intelligence (EI), and 74 percent of the constructs (26 out of 35) correlated significantly in the principals’ ratings of SL and EI. From these results, it would seem that these combinations are worth considering in the leadership behaviors of a school principal.
Beatty (2007) stated that servant leadership appears to be simple, but digging deep into the understanding of servant leadership behaviors displays that this type of leadership is probably the most profound and difficult. A possible reason for the difficulty is that it takes an inner change, not learning a set of skills, which emphasizes the importance of connecting emotional intelligence with servant leadership (Wong & Davey, 2007). Blanchard (2007) proposed that not only is servant leadership a way of life but it also takes an entire life journey to develop it.

Again, the expectations that are demanded from a school principal have become larger and more unreasonable and unrealistic (Beatty, 2006). The new criteria to evaluate principals in Washington State include the following: Lead to establish and sustain a school culture conducive to continuous improvement for students and staff. Lead the development and annual update of a comprehensive safe schools plan that includes prevention, intervention, crisis response, and recovery. Lead the development, implementation, and evaluation of the data-driven plan for improvement of student achievement. Assist instructional staff in aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment with state and local learning goals. Monitor, assist, and evaluate staff implementation of the school improvement plan, effective instruction, and assessment practices. Manage human and fiscal resources to accomplish student achievement goals. Communicate and partner with school community members to promote student learning. Demonstrate a commitment to closing the achievement gap (Association of Washington School Principals, 2010).

It seems that moral conviction and a calling to serve others, along with emotional stability and sensitivity to the emotional needs of others, are the behaviors needed to empower an effective principal. Cherniss (2000), Goleman (1998), and Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (1998) state that emotional intelligence does not stand alone for effective performance but is the foundation to build behaviors that provide for effective leadership. The significant correlation perceived by the principals’ self-rating and the teachers’ observed ratings of the principals in this study warrants a consideration of the role of emotional intelligence combined with servant leadership behaviors in the role of
a school principal. Servant leadership behaviors combined with emotional intelligence enables creating a community of empathy, caring, and serving.

I close with a story told to me, a story about two communities:

There were two rooms that were exactly the same, but the outcome was very different. Entering into the first room, you will see people sitting around an enormous round table with a large pot of savory stew set in the middle of the table. The smell is delicious, but around the pot sat desperate people who were starving. All were holding spoons with long handles that made it easy to reach into the pot, but because the handle of the spoon was longer than their arms, it was impossible to get the stew into their mouths. The people in this room were full of anguish and disparity, as their suffering was terrible.

Now, enter the other room. It is identical to the first. There was a similar pot of savory stew, and the people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well nourished, talking, laughing, and happily enjoying one another. What made the difference? The teller of the story described this room with all learning to feed one another. They were reaching across, showing empathy and care through serving one another mouthfuls of the savory stew. (Cavanaugh, 2004)

References


