

1-1-2009

## Educational Leadership: The Relationship Between Spirituality and Leadership Practices

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### Recommended Citation

Perkins, Gerra; Wellman, Nelda; and Wellman, Wendell (2009) "Educational Leadership: The Relationship Between Spirituality and Leadership Practices," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.  
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol7/iss1/14>

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Background

Throughout American history, schools and educational leaders have been in the spotlight because of the eminent task of preparing the young of our nation for competition within a global economy and the marketplace of ideas. Educational leaders have moved through the stages of management, industrial efficiency, and cultural leadership finally concluding that school management requires more than efficiency and organization (Brickham, 1996). With the advent of tough-minded management and the realization of the difference between a leader and a manager, combined with an increase in the high school dropout rate, awareness developed that something was not working in American Schools (Batten, 1989). Changes in the organizational landscape of America gave rise to the idea of the principal as the cultural leader (Rollins and Roberts, 1998). This plan also, was doomed to demise. The beginning of accountability spurred the popularity of the idea of the principal as the instructional leader. This initiative was the basis for holding someone accountable when the school failed.

Despite more than a decade of headlines about a generation at risk there has been little real impact upon the schools (Kessler, 1998). Why is it so hard to make changes within schools? As Jenlink (1995) stated, “Myriad factors contribute to the increasing difficulty of attempting to change schools” (p. 45). Jenlink concluded, these factors include the dynamic nature of complex systems, changing systems threatens stakeholder identity, there are few examples of change to follow, change efforts follow the wrong approach, change includes the dynamic nature of language, and management of the transition is difficult.

Badaracco and Ellsworth (1989) labeled the lack of change as inertial forces that cause organizations to develop inflexibility. When an organization develops inertia the result is frustration and burnout (Bolman and Deal, 2002). They further argued, when you hear complaints of “it’s not fun anymore” (p. 21), frustration and disenchantment have developed.

Yet, as educational leaders we have the “feeling as though something is missing in leadership studies and practice” (Howe, 1995, 78). We must ask the larger questions, “What is our meaning and purpose? and, How can we fulfill it?” (Kessler, 1998, 51). Ultimately, we must look to our philosophy and understanding of what guides us in our day-to-day lives, “our spirituality” (Stokley, 2002, 48). First, we must ask—what is spiritual leadership? Fullan (2002) answered, “Spiritual leadership in education is an alluring but complex phenomenon” (p. 14). Solomon and Hunter (2002) suggested that pairing spirituality and educational leadership might seem incongruous and even dissonant. They resolved the incongruity by explaining that spiritually is one’s “meaning system” (p. 38). Bolman and Deal (2002) called spirituality, a leadership challenge as forbidding as any challenge any educator will ever face.

Wheatley (2002) implied that leaders strengthened by faith, who act as servant leaders, find the courage to face the challenges of life. She further explained, “Chaos can’t be controlled” (p. 42) nor, can the unpredictable be predicted in life. Therefore, we must have a firm theoretical foundation on which to face the call or vocation of educational leadership. Leadership theorists posit that spirituality is

the core of effective leadership that guides behaviors and interactions with others (Bhindi and Duignan, 1997; Fairholm, 1998; Hoyle, 2002; Kanungo and Mendonca, 1996; Moxley, 2000). Thus, an effective leadership model will include characteristics of being scholarly, practical, ethical, moral, just, caring, equitable, fair, and democratic (Jenlink, 2001).

Educational leadership, in America today, is one of the toughest jobs (Carr, 2003). The educational leader “must stay focused on core business despite disparate stakeholder demands, uncertain funding, critical labor shortages, and must be highly skilled at dealing with sensitive and divisive issues within a politically charged environment” (p. 14). The academic expectations of our schools are increasing, and the cultural issues that must be dealt with are becoming more complex. Bolman and Deal (2001) stated, “Tragedy is the author of hope. Crisis brings us face to face with our soul” (p. 37). Therefore, the school and the educational leader must address the need for reform so that we do not experience the “risk of shrunken souls and spiritual malaise” (p. 40). The task of leading reform ultimately rests upon the educational leader who must become a spiritual scholar-practitioner. Jenlink (1995) stated, “We are responsible for the changes sought in society because we are the change we seek to bring about” (p. 47).

## Purpose

Leadership practices have been impacted because dynamic social, cultural, economic, and technological changes have increased the need for effective leadership in our schools. The school principal is experiencing great pressure from accountability standards, special interest groups, and varied demands from a changing demographic student body. These pressures require leadership anchored in a spiritual core that provides a sense of identity, convictions, principles, and steadfast leadership practices (Wheatley, 2002). Therefore the purpose of this research was to determine if there was a relationship between spirituality and leadership practices.

Spirituality included three subcategories: 1) caring for others, 2) transcendence, 3) seeking goodness and truth, and forgiveness (Rayburn and Richmond, 1996, 1999, 2003). Five leadership practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (1995) were examined. These included: 1) challenging the process, 2) inspiring a shared vision, 3) enabling others to act, 4) modeling the way, and 5) encouraging the heart.

## Research Procedures

The research question for this study asked, “What is the relationship, if any, between educational leaders’ spirituality and leadership practices?” This study used Pearson’s bivariate correlation analysis to determine the relationship between school leaders spirituality, as measured by the Inventory on Spirituality (Rayburn and Richmond, 1996, 2003), and leadership practices, as measured by the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes and Posner, 2003).

This study incorporated survey research, utilizing quantitative research methods to gather data, which were analyzed using parametric and non-parametric statistical operations, including Kendal’s Tau and bivariate correlation analysis. Seventy-one of the 100 randomly selected subjects, 35 females and 36 males, who were identified as Texas school principals by the Texas Education Agency for the 2004-2005 school year, participated in the study. The survey return response rate was 71 percent.

The problem addressed by this research was to determine the extent, if any, that spirituality impacts educational leadership practices. Spirituality was identified as the independent variable and included three subcategories: caring for others, transcendence, seeking goodness and truth, and forgiveness (Rayburn and Richmond, 1996, 1999, 2003). Five leadership practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (2003) were identified as the dependent variable. These included: challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart.

## Findings

The data collected supported the research hypothesis by yielding statistically significant relationships between spirituality as measured by the Inventory on Spirituality (Rayburn and Richmond, 1996, 1999, 2003) and the five leadership practices as measured by the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes and Posner, 2003). The five identified transformational leadership practices, by Kouzes and Posner (1995, 2003), are modeling the way, inspiring the way, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. The subscales of the Inventory on Spirituality were combined into one independent variable, labeled spirituality.

A Pearson correlation between the independent variable, spirituality, to the leadership practice of modeling the way found a relatively strong (.448) relationship. Further, this relationship was significant at the 0.01 level. Leaders who model the way do so “through personal example and dedicated execution” (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, 13). Kouzes and Posner argued that the leader who models the way never expects more from others than he is willing to demonstrate himself.

Leaders who inspire the way inspire others to commit to the organizational vision by understanding the needs and interest of others and by comprehending that “leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue” (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, 11). Freire (2002) further elaborate on shared dialogue when he argued that dialogue builds trust. Fullan (2001) postulated that trust is the foundation of leading. This study found a statistically significant relationship between spirituality and the leadership practice of inspiring the way. A Pearson correlation between the independent variable, spirituality, to the leadership practice of inspiring the way revealed a relatively strong (.423) relationship. This demonstrates that those who scored high on spirituality more likely scored high on inspiring the way. Additionally, this relationship was significant at the 0.01 level.

A Pearson correlation between the independent variable, spirituality, to the leadership practice of challenging the process found a strong (.554) relationship. Further, this relationship was significant at the 0.01 level. Leaders who challenge the process accept the challenge “to change the status quo and know well that experimentation, innovation, and change involve risk of failure, but they proceed anyway” (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, 10). Kouzes and Posner further posit that this type leader is willing to do what is right even when it is not popular.

Leaders who enable others to act build consensus around problem solving. Kouzes and Posner (1995) further elaborated, these leaders “enlist the help and support of all who must live with the results” (p. 12). This study revealed that those leaders who scored high on spirituality also scored high on enabling others to act. A Pearson correlation between the independent variable, spirituality, to the leadership practice of enabling others to act revealed a moderately strong (.423) relationship. Further, this relationship was significant at the 0.01 level.

A Pearson correlation between the independent variable, spirituality, to the leadership practice of encouraging the heart found a moderately strong (.394) relationship. Also, this relationship was significant at the 0.01 level. According to Kouzes and Posner (1995), leaders who encourage the heart build teamwork, self-confidence, and provide positive reinforcement to “encourage the heart of their constituents to carry on” (p. 13).

## Discussion

The results of this study revealed that spirituality and good leadership practices are correlated at a very significant level for the participants of this survey. A very interesting finding was that horizontal spirituality, or seeking goodness and truth/forgiveness, cooperation, and peacefulness by reaching out to others, as defined by the Inventory on Spirituality (Rayburn and Richmond, 1996, 1999, 2003) is significant at the 0.01 level to the cumulative of the leadership practices. Conversely, the vertical spirituality of transcendence, or guidance by a higher power, is significant at the 0.05 level to the cumulative of the leadership practices.

Another interesting finding: all three subscales from the Inventory on Spirituality (Rayburn and Richmond, 1996, 1999, 2003) were most strongly related to the leadership practice of challenging the process. Goodness, truth/forgiveness, cooperation and peacefulness revealed a strong relationship (.534) to the leadership practice of challenging the process. Additionally, transcendence was correlated (.443) to challenging the process, as well as caring for others (.439). This implies that the act of reaching out in goodness and seeking truth has a strong relationship to challenging the status quo. This is especially pertinent if the status quo is embedded with unjust, unfair, and discriminatory practices.

This finding corroborates and provides strong support to the researchers who posit that spirituality is correlated to leadership practices (Bolman and Deal, 2001; Fullan, 2002; Hoyle, 2002; Kanungo and Mendonca, 1996; Moxley, 2000; Stokley, 2002; Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1999; Wheatley, 2002, 2004). This view of spirituality parallels the scholar-practitioner leadership approach as defined by Jenlink (2001) and the views of Freire (2002).

Wheatley (2002) explained that a new awareness of spirituality was currently impacting educational practice. Jenlink (2001) explained that scholar-practitioner provides multiple ways of viewing educational leadership. He postulated, “Embodied in the work of the educational administrator/leader are the values of social justice, equity, caring, and democracy” (p. 6). Thus, the scholar-practitioner approach and spirituality parallel ideologically through caring, respect for others, seeking good for others, and seeking truth. This involves making leadership decisions for the good of others (Wheatley, 2002). Freire (2002) posited that leadership founded “upon love, humility, and faith...becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (p. 91). This relationship of dialogue, Freire concluded, would result in an even closer relationship of mutual trust and hope.

The significant relationship between spirituality and leadership practices identified by this study provokes the contemplation—Are leader-practitioners spiritual beings within a human experience or human beings within a spiritual experience? Empowerment of this dimension of leadership will naturally enhance leadership practices. Trust and authenticity developed from principled moral values, enhanced by an ethic of caring, justice, equity, fairness, democracy, and community within the scholar-

practitioner, exemplifies the traits of the leader (Jenlink, 2001).

The results of this study revealed a statistically significant relationship between the three subscales within the Inventory on Spirituality (Rayburn and Richmond, 1996, 1999, 2003), and the five leadership practices within the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes and Posner, 2003). There was weak correlation (.216) between the subscales of transcendence, from the Inventory on Spirituality to the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes and Posner, 2003) of enabling others to act.

Overall the female participants had a higher mean score than the male participants for spirituality. This finding was corroborated by Crose (1997) when she stated, "Women are clearly more religious than men at all stages of life" (p. 128). The gender composition of the study was almost equally male and female. All age categories, diverse ethnic groups, and varied years of experience were represented in the study. Varied educational levels were reported, as well as varied school compositions. Although total diversity was included, a particularly interesting finding, corroborated by the Statistical Abstract of the United States (2006), was that 94.4 percent of the participants "sometimes, usually, or almost always" desired a greater/deeper level of spirituality. This causes one to question if our leadership development programs are truly meeting the needs of today's educational leaders.

Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1999) and Wheatley (2002) argued that meaning is found by having an anchor of the soul—an anchor of the soul, which is steadfast, sure, and unshakable. This steadfast anchor will give calm assurance when standing against social injustice and will not be terrified by the embedded unfair and discriminatory status quo. Moreover, this steadfast anchor will provide the courage to delve into what matters most—our spirituality. Every leader will eventually reach the end of his/her career. The empowered spiritual scholar-practitioner will reflect without regret because his/her decisions and actions were made for the good of others. The strength of reflection will be the joy of having chosen a greater dimension of spirituality through justice, caring, equity, authenticity, and sound principles. The summation of spirituality is having an anchor that provides the courage to do that, which is right for others in a manner that is caring, just, equitable, and democratic.

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VN:R\_U [1.9.11\_1134]