To Empathize, or Not Empathize in Educational Leadership

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Transformational leadership, as one of the most influential leadership models in educational administration, highlights leaders' personalities and the interpersonal capacities between leaders and followers (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bush, 2014; Bush & Glover, 2014). Transformational leaders focus on sharing vision and goals of an organization with followers, challenging followers to be problem solvers and coaching followers into more capable leaders. Thus, leaders' abilities to communicate with followers how to monitor, regulate, and manage their own emotional experience and expressions to become critical (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Connelly & Gooty, 2015; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Rajah, Song, Arvey, 2011). As a result, the transformational leadership focuses on *how* leaders' personalities influence interactions with followers and it champions the power of quality personal interactions in creating a harmonious work environment to effect changes on school outcomes. In their daily interaction with followers, leaders perceive and respond to the surrounding reality; their responses trigger followers' reactions and effect subsequent actions. In particular, the emotional dynamics could be either interruptive or facilitating in the communication process between the leader and the followers (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

In a review of the empirical research published in peer-reviewed journals between 1992-2012, Berkovich and Eyal (2015) identified three themes on the relationship of emotions and educational leadership. The three most relevant to educational leadership are: *leaders' emotional experiences and displays*, *leaders' behaviors and their effects on followers' emotions*, and *leaders' emotional abilities*. In the first theme of leaders' emotional experiences and displays, macro- and micro-contextual factors, leadership role factors, and mission-related factors were identified as shaping leaders' emotional experiences and expressions. The second theme posited that favorable leader behaviors demonstrating supportive, just, and cooperative elements were more likely to receive followers' positive emotions, whereas unfavorable leader

behaviors received followers' negative emotions. The third theme explored emotional abilities around the concept of emotional intelligence.

Since Beldoch (1964) proposed the term of emotional intelligence (EI), this concept gained significant popularity in the educational research community. The *ability EI* focuses on one's ability to perceive emotion in oneself and others, use emotions to facilitate thinking, understand emotions and their processes, and manage the experience and expression of emotions in the social context (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Rather than focusing on actual abilities, the *trait EI* (Petrides & Furnham, 2001) refers to how people self-perceive their own abilities of understanding emotions within a personality framework. Goleman (1998) proposed the mixed model of EI that encompasses both *ability* EI and *trait* EI covering a wide variety of competencies and skills that are important to leadership performance. The mixed model of EI identified five EI constructs: self-awareness, self-regulation, social skill, empathy, and motivation.

Regardless of the specific models, at the core of EI lies the capacity to relate to others. Our paper will focus on empathy and extrapolate what we have learned about empathy from research in psychology. Despite empathy being commonly valued by leaders and stakeholders in the educational leadership field, extensive research is needed in terms of how to integrate it in practices. We reviewed past research on leadership styles and communication to understand empathy in the educational leadership setting. We presented the concept of empathy from different perspectives, and further discuss the considerations in integrating empathy into educational leadership practices.

Leadership Styles and Communication

In reviewing the history of leadership theories from the early 20th century, we saw communication and interpersonal relationship consistently emerged as an important component along the evolution of leadership theories. The Great Man Theory of leadership proposes certain men are born to be leaders and step up to demonstrate their in-born leadership

characteristics when crises arise, and Stogdill (1974) identified ten traits and skills of in-born leaders. Three of them are directly related to interpersonal communication: "ability to influence other peoples' behavior", "capacity to structure social interaction systems to the purpose at hand", and "readiness to absorb interpersonal stress". Weber stated that a good leader should be the one with special charismatic personality characteristic that enables them exceptional powers to complete leaders' tasks. Both Likert (1967) and Yukl (1971) proposed participative leaders should show great concern for employees, listens carefully to their ideas, and include them in the decision-making process. Along the same line, the Leader-Member Exchange Theory proposed that higher quality exchanges between supervisor and their subordinates result in less turnover, more positive performance evaluations, higher frequency of promotions, greater organizational commitment, more desirable work assignments, better job attitudes, more attention and support from the leader, greater participation, and faster career progress (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen, 1976). A more recent leadership theory, the servant leadership theory, highlights the follower's perspective in the leader-subordinate relationship. Ten characteristics of servant leaders include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of the people and building community. The servant leadership theory considers that listening and communicating with empathy are critical for leaders to become successful in reaching their goals.

As the most widely researched leadership theory, transformational leadership proposes that leaders should engage with others and create a connection to raise the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the followers. Bass (1985) indicated that transformational leadership was centered in the followers and emphasized on motivating followers to reach beyond leaders' expectations. It has been proposed that leaders should raise followers' level of consciousness about the importance of organization values and goals so followers can share viewpoints with the leader when working with each other. Followers are encouraged to

transcend their self-interest with the leader in working towards the organization goals. Interpersonal communication is the key to transformational leadership style during such a process, where both the leader and followers share minds, work together with inspirational motivation, reach goals beyond the concrete plan to address higher needs of the organization, and followers emerge as leaders. Those outcomes are promised when leaders' influences on followers are successfully implemented, leaders' messages are well-received by followers, and the followers are motivated to grow. Therefore, the question remains as to how leaders and followers share minds and communicate effectively.

Leading with Empathy in Education

While communication is broadly defined as getting messages across through language, nonverbal language, decisions, and actions, Bass (1985) proposed that it took a charismatic leader to inspire followers to perform beyond leader's expectations. This charismatic leader should be dominant, self-confident, have a strong desire to influence others, and hold a high moral standard (Northouse, 2004). Choi (2006) examined leadership characteristics through motivational lens and proposed three core components of charismatic leadership: envisioning, empathy, and empowerment. Empathy is defined as one's ability to identity, understand, and experience others' emotions (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Choi (2006) proposed that "charismatic leaders engage in empathic behavior by being sensitive to their followers' needs and emotions, sharing their emotions, and helping them realize their objectives" (p. 28). Choi believed that empathic behaviors could help build trust between leaders and followers, establish emotional bonds with leaders, and strength followers' identification with their leaders. Once followers' needs for affiliation through such channels are met, personal and emotional relationship between leaders and followers can be established to create a harmonious and cooperative work environment. Hence, the whole organization can perform under the leadership to reach goals and enable changes.

The theoretical relationship between empathy, task performance, and perceived leadership impression was examined in a study using small workgroups (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002). In this study, participants first worked individually on the task of their choice (a complex managerial task or a relatively simple nonmanagerial task) while sitting together so they could see what others picked. Then they worked in a team on typical group activities that require corporations and group decisions making, i.e., writing a team report, choosing a group task to perform, and brainstorming about corporate products or generating advertising slogans. It was found that leader's peer-reported empathy influenced how their leadership were perceived by others. When the leader empathized with others, they were able to establish an effective relationship with subordinates that in turn benefited themselves. Empathic behaviors shaped people's perspective taking, consequently benefited the teamwork outcome, for example, helped solve problems in the relationship.

Relatedly, a significant, positive correlation between empathy and perspective taking was identified in a longitudinal study using team members ($N = 382$) in 48 self-managing teams (Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002). In this study, empathy was defined as subjectively identifying with the emotion of others and experiencing concern for that emotion (Hoffman, 1984) and perspective taking was defined as detaching oneself and analyzing others' perspectives in an objective manner (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). It was found that empathy was positively related to team members' perspective taking. Similarly, leaders who could read emotional expression better and demonstrate empathy to others were rated as more effective leaders (Byron, 2007). Among all skills measured under the construct of Emotional Intelligence, empathy was found to be the most important ingredient in transformational leadership behaviors (Butler & Chinoweky, 2006). Such findings were consistent with Choi's (2006) proposal regarding the important role empathy plays in building effective transformational leadership, including perceiving followers' needs, communicating effectively with followers, and achieving a highly cohesive work environment between the leader and the followers.

While empathy has been well-studied in the field of organizational leadership, few specific fields have been explored with the exception of medical education. Empathy has been a popular topic in training nurses, midwife students, medical students, and practitioners in the recent culturally diverse context (Brugel, Nilsenova, & Tates, 2015; Chapman et al., 2018; Hogan, Rossiter, & Catling, 2018; Pohontsch, Stark, Ehrhardt, Kotter, & Scherer, 2018; Zhou & Fischer, 2018). There seem to be pressing needs for research attentions on the topic of empathy in the medial education field for achieving a better doctor/nurse-patient relationship in practices (Dean & McAllister, 2018; Lee, 2018). In fact, similar needs are also present in the field of education leadership and other public services areas (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Bruckner, 2017). For example, Berkovich and Eyal considered emotions central to educational leaders as emotion functions as the vehicle for educational leaders to respond to surrounding reality that relates to reaching goals. Educational leaders' emotional behaviors were believed to trigger the emotion of teachers and staff in a reciprocal way and educational leaders' affective responses are the precursors of desired work outcomes. It has been recognized that educational leaders' emotion could be influenced by economic, social, political, and technological macro factors, as well as the expressions of appropriate affective responses could be challenging in practices.

Qualitative studies conducted in U.K. schools suggested that school leaders' empathic abilities were valuable in changing schools' emotionally charged situation, e.g., in the social justice transformation process (Cliffe, 2011; Crawford, 2004). Similarly, Jansen (2006) found that school leaders' empathy allowed themselves to "touch others and be touched", thus became the viable force to balance, make the change, and enable transformation in the mostly unsupportive environment. Principals' effectiveness in dealing with complaint in the interaction between principals and parents was examined in a mixed-methods study (Robinson & Le Fevre, 2011). It was found that those demonstrated a deeper level of interest in parents' emotions were perceived as more respectful. These studies highlight the value of empathy in implementing effective communication in the school administration.

Research also looked at whether the professional development that targets at raising leaders' awareness on empathic abilities could help school management. Parrish (2015) conducted interviews before and after a leadership capacity development intervention and found empathy (understanding others and taking active interest in their concerns) was identified as the most significant emotional intelligence trait. The participants considered empathy as "the need for leaders to accurately identify and understand a person, their concerns, needs and abilities and then appropriately manage the person in light of this understanding to promote productivity and success" (p. 829). Meanwhile, several quantitative studies examining whether leaders' empathic abilities could be enhanced with interventions or training programs provided mixed results (e.g. Smith, Montello, & White, 1992; Semel, 2016).

Even though empathy has attracted attention in the field of educational leadership (Zorn & Bolder, 2007), there is hardly any consensus on what construct it truly means. Even when research adopted almost identical definitions of empathy, the empirical studies tend to vary a great deal in their operational definitions of empathy. Furthermore, these studies typically show associations between empathy and leadership behavior instead of causal relationships, and tend to be low power study (i.e., small sample size). Thus, it is hard to translate into specific action recommendations. For example, this could lead to discrepancies in what researchers conceptualized and what leaders on the ground perceived and operated. Fortunately, research has shown significant progress in understanding empathy in recent years. In the section below, we will discuss the recent research on empathy and make conjecture to its relevance to the educational leadership setting.

Understanding Empathy in Educational Leadership

Since Titchener coined the term *empathy* over 100 years ago (Wispe, 1986), empathy has been used as an umbrella term for processes and products that are part of recruiting one's own experience in relating to others. At times, empathy is used interchangeably with emotional, compassion, sympathy, tenderness toward others, and associated communal emotion (Cuff,

Brown, Taylor,& Howat, 2016; Zickfeld, Schubert, Seibt & Fiske, 2017). The broad scope and inherent ambiguity of empathy are not surprising. In the course of its evolution, intelligent capacities evolve incrementally with new layers being built on top of the old ones interrelatedly. De Waal and Preston (2017) dubbed their perception-action model of empathy as the Russian-doll model, which focuses on the emotional contagion, the matching of the emotional states between two parties (e.g., you frown, and I frown). Perspective taking and empathic concern emerged on top of the evolutionarily old socio-affective basis, claiming that perspective taking and empathic concern are not automatic, requiring mentalizing others' minds, regulating one's own emotion, and separating self from others.

The interconnectedness of the different components of empathy suggests that it is not fruitful to come up with one single definition of empathy or simply emphasize the distinctions of empathic processes without considering them being functionally integrated whole. Consistent with this insight, Cuff et al. (2016) used the snowballing sampling procedure and identified 43 different definitions of empathy that were used in the literature of personality, social psychology, clinical psychology, cognition, neuroscience, and applied fields such as law and social work. In analyzing these different definitions of empathy, Cuff et al. proposed eight themes to understand the underlying mechanism of empathy and its behavioral manifestations (e.g. mimicry, helping behavior, and altruism). We will discuss themes that are to be the most relevant to the educational leadership field, making inferences in how empathy should be integrated in practices.

Cognitive versus affective empathy is the most discussed theme. Cognitive empathy refers to recognizing other's mind and emotion; whereas affective empathy emphasizes experiencing others' emotions. Cognitive empathy tends to be driven by top-down processes such as recruiting one's experiences and imagining oneself in the other person's shoe; whereas affective empathy tends to be driven by direct perception of emotional stimuli (e.g., the

confusion expressed in the face and body posture). Cognitive empathy emerges inside the mind, whereas affective empathy is trigged by the outside world (de Waal & Preston, 2017).

These two components of empathy have long been noted and discussed. Consider Stotland's (1969) emotional empathy and Dymond's (1949)'s cognitive role-taking approach as examples (cited in Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Stotland defined empathy as a "vicarious emotional response to the perceived emotional experiences of others" (p. 525); whereas Dymond believed empathy was to "*imaginatively* take the role of another and can understand and accurately predict that person's thoughts, feelings, and actions" (p. 525). This raises the question as to what it means to be empathic in educational leadership practices. For example, would intellectual understanding of followers who come from demographics that is very different from the leaders' be sufficient to allow leaders to engage with the followers effectively and take followers' circumstances into account? Should leaders not succumb to the emotional contexts and avoid making decisions as a result of reacting to situations? To make rational decisions, what setup from the educational leadership perspective should leaders adopt, the emotional module or keeping cognitive distance in the leader-follower communication? Given the interconnectedness of cognitive and affective empathy, it is best that leaders demonstrate empathic concern and reflect on their decisions before communicating to followers.

Even though affective empathy could be triggered automatically and even involuntarily, it's important to keep in mind that cognitive and affective empathy are not separate processes. In light of the Russian-doll model of empathy and research in neuroscience, the deployment of cognitive empathy must still access the affective networks in the brain (de Waal & Preston, 2017). An interesting scenario would be, if the leader is enthusiastic about an initiative, but recognizes a lack of understanding and support from the followers, would it be necessary for the leader to demonstrate affective empathy toward the followers' mindset, or simply recruit cognitive empathy in the buy-in process? If so, what practices would be viable for leaders to

demonstrate affective empathy and recruit followers' cognitive empathy, collectively, in solving problems?

A second theme relevant to leadership practices emphasizes the congruency between the emotions of the empathizer (i.e. leader) and empathizee (i.e. follower). Hein and Singer (2008) suggested that congruency is what separates *empathy* from *sympathy*. When there is empathy, both parties' understanding of the problem and associated feelings are matched. When there is sympathy, one party recognizes the other party's situation but not helicopter in the other party's world. In the daily leadership practices, it raises an important question as to the extent whether leaders need to resonate with the followers and honing in on the followers' emotions. Would too much of congruency backfire?

Bloom (2017) suggested that too much of congruency could have unintended consequences. For example, therapists who tune into clients' emotions have difficulty in disengaging themselves from experiencing clients' normally negative emotions and are more likely to experience burnout. A related important question is whether too much empathy would impact leaders' competency. Consensus has not reached yet in the scientific community. A recent study went as far as investigating if tearful individuals are perceived as less competent, and did not find adequate evidence (Zickfeld, van de Ven, Schubert, & Vingerhoets, 2017).

Empathy is not necessarily the required precursor of prosocial actions. For example, people offer help in the case of emergency even before experiencing empathy (Pithers, 1999 as cited in Cuff et al., 2016). The question at the debate is what sorts of tasks, instructions, and analysis strategies are conducive to tangible prosocial outcomes. For example, the iconic image of a Syrian child, lying face-down on a beach, led to the pouring of empathy toward Syrian refugees as evidenced by the donations given to the Swedish Red Cross special fund (Slovic, Västfjäll, Erlandsson, & Gregory, 2017). This lying face-down image is far more powerful than any of the reports and statistics of death count for desired prosocial actions. In the context of leader-follower relationship, further research is needed to examine *how to* induce empathy to

achieve desired prosocial actions. What situational factors could lead to reduced empathy or no empathy at all?

A third theme is whether empathy is a personality trait. A study that used 742 twins and adult siblings demonstrated that affective empathy has far greater heritability than cognitive empathy (Melchers, Montag, Reuter, Spinath, & Hahn, 2016). This suggests that some individuals are genetically wired to be more empathic than others. It seems reasonable to suggest that leaders need to know if they are high or low on the empathy scale and be aware of how their empathic styles influence their work. This study also suggests that affective empathy is much harder to be trained even though it is at the core of the Russian-doll model. Some studies showed that familiarity promotes empathy by blurring self and other representations in the brain (Beckes, Coan, & Hasselmo, 2013). This finding resonates with proponents of empathetic school which promotes whole people development (Tomlinson & Murphy, 2018). Leaders, however, need to be aware of how their decisions of help are influenced by their personal relationship with the followers. Weeping, chills, and bodily warmth were positively associated with empathic concerns (Zickfeld, Schubert, Seibt, & Fiske, 2017). Leaders need to be aware of the impact of such behavior in building relationships.

If genetics accounts for some of the differences in empathy, what does that mean to the professional development of leader positions? For leaders who are low on the empathy scale, would they simply acknowledge their deficiency in communicating with followers? Research shows that people's mindset about empathy impacts their behaviors towards others. People who believe empathy can be developed exerted greater efforts in challenging contexts than those who believe empathic capacity is fixed (Schumann, Zaki, & Dweck, 2014). For example, the believers of empathy being malleable would go beyond their call of duty and try to understand others on personally important sociopolitical issues even when their viewing are at conflicts. This has great relevance to leaders.

Lastly, leaders are in the high-power position. This begs the question whether power gives one more capacity to empathize. Research suggested that the value placed on the target, the blame, the perceived power, and the perceived need are all considerations we may need include in building relationship with empathy (Galinsky, Magee, & Ines, 2006). High power participants were found to be more likely to rely on their own vantage point and were less inclined to adjust to other's perspectives. They were even found to be less accurate in reading others' emotions compared with others. To leaders, it becomes important to be aware of others' traits and the specific situational triggers for empathy so that they can be more effective in communication.

Implications for Educational Administrators

Research on empathy in the educational leadership field is far from being extensive. The research discussed above provides some insights for building effective leader-follower communication. Considering educational administrators are the individuals typically with high power in making important decisions, cautions are necessary so they can make efforts to be more accurate in reading others' emotions in communication. This is especially important to leaders in public education where the success or failure of effective communication between the leader and their surroundings could impose significant impacts on students, teachers, staff, and stakeholders.

Particular attention is needed for leaders to approach empathy and demonstrate empathic behaviors in solving conflicts in workplace. Knowing there are shared neural representations between cognitive and affective empathy, leaders should keep in mind that intellectual understanding of others does not guarantee empathic concern and the two aspects of empathic process should be balanced. It would reduce reacting to the emotional elements in the situation if leaders pause, reflect and discuss with someone who has more experiences in the followers' specific situations. Lastly, knowing our own constraints on the empathy scale, limit ourselves being tuning too much into others if we are high on the scale, and challenge

ourselves by getting to more of the followers if we are low on the scale. The balance is delicate as illustrated by Bloom below:

> I think this is a mistake. I have argued elsewhere that certain features of empathy make it a poor guide to social policy. Empathy is biased; we are more prone to feel empathy for attractive people and for those who look like us or share our ethnic or national background. And empathy is narrow; it connects us to particular individuals, real or imagined, but is insensitive to numerical differences and statistical data. As Mother Teresa put it, "If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will." Laboratory studies find that we really do care more about the one than about the mass, so long as we have personal information about the one (Bloom, 2014, p. 15).

Recommendations for Future Research

As such, future research should explore approaches that educational leaders could utilize in putting "affective empathy" aside to reach fairer and more moral public decision for the mass body of students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders. Recent studies used literature study (Diatta, 2018) and theater performance (Baer, Salisbury & Goldstein, 2019) as tools to cultivate students' empathy, and eventually enhance their understanding and appreciation to diversity in education. For administrators in the leadership position, future research may look at whether large-scale data or experiences, for example the life of someone we have personal relationship with or whose name is known through media, are more helpful for making good decisions. As leaders in the public educational field, we should set the ultimate goal through leadership as serving the mass and make good use of empathy in the decision making process.

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