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# The Relationship Between Selected Leadership Behaviors and Attitudes Toward Behavioral and Social Inclusive Practices Among Middle School Principals in North Carolina

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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELECTED LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL INCLUSIVE PRACTICES AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN NORTH CAROLINA

By

Dr. Mary A. Houser, Dr. Gennifer Bell, Dr. Virginia Dickens, and Dr. Terence Hicks

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between selected leadership behaviors (transformational and transactional) and attitudes toward selected inclusive practices (behavioral and social) for students with disabilities. Determining how transformational and transactional leadership behaviors are related to principals' attitudes toward inclusive practices is needed because such understanding will assist administrators and other professionals in deciding what type of leader is best suited for leading inclusive schools. There are few studies related to administrators' leadership behaviors and their attitudes toward inclusion in any form. The results of this study provide an opportunity to examine North Carolina principals' leadership behaviors as well as their attitudes toward inclusive practices. The results also prove beneficial to administrators and other professionals who are working to better their currently existing inclusive programs or to generate new ones.

In recent years, as a result of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate, American schools have seen an increase in students with disabilities being educated in the regular classroom, which is known as *inclusion*. This study used a one-group, correlational design, using two instruments. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (5x-short), Third Edition – Leader Form (MLQ) and the Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES) were mailed to 215 randomly selected middle school principals in North Carolina. The response rate was 49.7%. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to analyze the relationship between selected leadership behaviors (transformational and transactional) and attitudes toward selective inclusive practices (behavioral and social). Results from the study indicated that there was a significant relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive education for the sample of this study ( $r(75) = .320, p < .01$ ). There was no significant relationship between transactional leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive practices for the sample of this study ( $r(72) = -.068, p < .05$ ). The findings of this study have indicated that further examination into the relationship between leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive education is warranted to assist educators in making critical decisions about the type of leader that is best suited for

leading inclusive schools, providing quality professional development to principals regarding inclusive culture, and making a significant contribution to existing literature on leadership and special education.

## Introduction

Leadership has many definitions (Howard, 2004). According to Stodgill (1974), “there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” (p. 26). Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) stated, “the meaning of leadership remains murky, and its present status is highly dependent on a set of possibly fleeting, modern Western values” (p. 425). Most definitions, however, reflect a process in which intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization (Yukl, 2002). For example, according to Burns (1978), “Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of the follower” (p.18).

There are several leadership behaviors associated with an effective leader. Communicating a vision is noted as an essential behavior to general leadership (Dyal, Flynt, & Bennett-Walker, 1996). According to Gunter (2001), effective leadership and management in schools are being defined as a top-down model in which the leader is visionary and everyone else follows. Bennis (1997) stated that the ability to provide direction and meaning to subordinates is paramount. In essence, effective school reform requires visionary leadership (Hargreaves, 2004; Ingram, 1997).

Inclusive education occurs when students with disabilities are educated in regular education classes with non-disabled peers in their neighborhood schools to the maximum extent possible with the support of aids and services (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). This is a result of the legal term *least restrictive environment*, which indicates that students with disabilities should receive their education in an educational setting as close to normal as possible. Over the past 30 years, there has been increased speculation as to where special education students receive the best education (Dorn, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 1996; Dunn, 1968; Kauffman & Smucker, 1995; Keefe & Davis, 1998; Will, 1986). Research suggests (Praisner, 2003) that students with disabilities are more often being taught in general education classrooms with the help of additional supports and services (inclusion). Professionals and others in the field of special education consider this is a radical change from students with disabilities being denied a free appropriate public education, as was the case prior to Public Law 94-142 in 1975. Inclusion has transformed the concept of a dual system of education to one system of educating students with disabilities alongside their typically developing peers in general education classrooms. It has been a progression of special education services from a denial of equal educational opportunities to the maintenance of separate facilities to mainstreaming to the now current model of inclusive education. Inclusion is not just about providing a general education classroom for services, but rather, providing students opportunities to participate in all areas of school life including sports, teams, and/or clubs (Parker & Day, 1997).

Because of the realization that more and more students with disabilities are being educated in the regular education classroom (Praisner, 2003; Riehl, 2000), the question of

effective leadership emerges. Leadership plays an integral role in the development of successful programming for students with special needs (Brookover, Erickson, & McEvoy, 1996; Wellisch, MacQueen, Carriere, & Duck, 1978).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study examined two concepts: leadership behaviors (transformational and transactional) and selected inclusive educational practices (behavioral and social) for students with disabilities. This research was based on two research hypotheses that sought to determine the relationship that these two leadership behavior types have to North Carolina middle school principals' attitudes toward behavioral and social inclusive practices.

### **Methodology**

This study used a one-group, correlational design, using two instruments. According to Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (2002), "quantitative research uses objective measurement and statistical analysis of numeric data to understand and explain phenomena" (p. 22). The goal of quantitative research is to determine the relationship between one thing (an independent variable) and another (a dependent variable or outcome variable) of a population (Hopkins, 2007). Ary et al. (2002) further indicated that "correlational research relates two (or more) variable measures from the same group of subjects" (p. 354). In addition, it "seeks to examine the strength and direction of relationships among two or more variables" (p. 25).

#### *Profile of Study Participants*

The participants in this study were randomly selected middle school principals in the public schools of North Carolina. As seen in Table 1, the demographic data revealed that the vast majority of principals were currently leading schools participating in inclusive practices (90.7%, 97 principals). Nearly half of the participants were female (47.7%, 51 principals) and half male (45.8%, 49 principals). The majority of participants were Caucasian (68.2%, 73 principals) followed by African American (22.4%, 24 principals). The majority of principals had 4-7 years of administrative experience (31.8%, 34 principals).

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Table 1.

Profile of Participants in Middle School Leadership Behavior Study

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Question	Frequency	Percent
NC middle school principals leading schools participating in behavioral and social inclusive practices		97.907%
Gender		
Female	51	47.7%
Male	49	45.8%
Race		
Caucasian	73	68.2%
African American	24	22.4%
Years of Administrative Experience		
4-7 years	34	31.8%

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### **Instrumentation**

#### *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (5-x short) – Leader Form*

The MLQ was originally developed by Bruce Avolio and Bernard Bass in 1995 and is based on a Full Range Leadership Model. The MLQ (5x-short), Third edition is the most recent version (2004) of the MLQ. The MLQ (5x-short), Third edition – Leader Form was used for this study. The leader form asked participants to rate themselves. The

MLQ has been used in both field and laboratory research to study transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles.

This leadership assessment tool has been tested and verified as a reliable assessment tool in several previous studies (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Avolio & Bass, 2004; Barling). According to Whitelaw (2001), “the comparative studies and replication studies confirm that the MLQ can be considered a reliable and valid instrument” (p. 2). Avolio and Bass (2004) indicated that the construct validity and reliability of the questionnaire have been tested by examining 14 independent samples that included 3,786 respondents. The reliabilities for the scales on the MLQ ranged from .74 to .94, which meet the standards for internal consistency (de Vaus, 2002).

In its most recent version (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), the MLQ (5x-short) - Leader Form (2004) maintains concise, simplistic directions for participants and is self-reporting. In completing the MLQ (5x-Short) Leader Form (2004), principals evaluated how frequently they engaged in specific leadership behaviors. For example, a principal may have been asked to respond and rate his behavior with respect to the statement, “I provide others with assistance in exchange for their efforts” (MLQ-Leader Form). Participants used a five-point Likert scale to rate their frequency. The rating scale is: 0 means *not at all*; 1 means *once in awhile*; 2 means *sometimes*; 3 means *fairly often*; and 4 means *frequently, if not always*. Principals frequently displayed a leadership behavior by responding to an item with a number 3 or a 4. To illustrate, if a principal rated the item “I talk about the future optimistically” with a number 4, it meant that he or she displayed this particular transformational leadership behavior frequently, if not always. Conversely, principals seldom displayed a leadership behavior by responding to an item with 0, 1, or 2.

The researcher examined only those questions that assessed transformational and transactional behaviors. These included selected items from the MLQ (5x short) - Leader Form. The transformational scale was identified as items 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 21, 23, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, and 36 on the MLQ. The transactional scale was identified as items 1, 3, 4, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 22, 24, 27, and 35 on the MLQ.

#### *Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES)*

The Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale, or ATIES instrument, was designed by Felcia Wilczenski and copyrighted in 1993. The ATIES was designed to measure attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

Originally, the ATIES was validated as a 32-item instrument on 301 general education classroom teachers in the state of New Hampshire (Wilczenski, 1993). According to Wilczenski, the scale development study, “found evidence for construct validity; that four measurable constructs – social, academic, physical and behavioral – were present in the scale” (p. 308). Additionally, reliability coefficients for the four dimensions were found to range between .82 for an individual factor to .92 for a total score as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha (O’Rourke-Trigiani, 2003). Wilczenski reduced her assessment tool to only those items that contained a factor loading of .55 or higher, which resulted in the most current ATIES questionnaire. Cross-validation procedures were conducted on the shortened form. Adequate internal consistency was determined by factors possessing sufficiently high reliability coefficients. They are as follows:

Dimension I (Physical): .83

Dimension II (Academic): .84

Dimension III (Behavioral): .87

Dimension IV (Social): .82

Total: .92

The ATIES took study participants approximately 10 minutes to complete (Wilczenski, 1993). Wilczenski's instrument examines four dimensions of inclusion accommodations: physical, academic, behavioral, and social. However, for the purposes of this study, only the behavioral and social dimensions of inclusion were examined.

Four items were included to measure each of the two dimensions (behavioral and social) for a total of 8 items. The behavioral dimension is comprised of Items 2, 8, 12 and 15 of the ATIES. The social dimension is comprised of Items 4, 6, 9, and 16 of the ATIES. To illustrate, participants were asked to respond to the statement, "Students who are physically aggressive toward their peers should be in regular classes" (Wilczenski, 1993, p. 1). Using one of six forced-choice responses, the participants responded to the statement. This Likert-type response format provides favorability ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Participants expressed favorable attitudes toward inclusive practices by responding to items with the numbers 4 (agree somewhat) 5 (agree) or 6 (strongly agree). Conversely, participants expressed unfavorable attitudes toward inclusive practices by responding to items with a 3 (disagree somewhat) 2 (disagree) or 1 (strongly disagree).

### **Procedures**

This study was conducted in the fall of 2007. The researchers mailed a package to randomly selected middle school principals that included: (1) a cover letter addressing issues such as consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation status; (2) an instruction sheet including the requested return date; (3) a demographic questionnaire; (4) the MLQ instrument; (5) the ATIES instrument; and (6) a return addressed stamped envelope. Principals were asked to complete the questionnaires at their own discretion and return all questionnaires (demographic, MLQ, and ATIES) in the stamped envelope provided by the requested due date.

### **Analyses of Data**

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-PC) was used to process all data. The researchers computed all relevant descriptive statistics on collected data. Items 1-36 on the MLQ were categorized as transformational or transactional by the MLQ authors, Avolio and Bass. The participants' responses to these items, grouped as separate behavior types, were statistically compared to the participants' responses to the behavioral and social items on the ATIES. The Pearson  $r$  bivariate correlational technique was used to conduct the analysis. In all statistical contrasts, the .05 significance criterion was observed.

## Results

Transformational leadership behaviors were derived from items 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 21, 23, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, and 36 on the MLQ. Attitudes toward inclusive practices scores were derived from items 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15, and 16 of the ATIES. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to determine if there was a relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and selected inclusive practices as seen in Table 2. In the case of transformational leadership behaviors and selected attitudes toward inclusive practices,  $r(75) = .320, p < .01$ . Therefore, a significant relationship was found between North Carolina middle school principals' transformational leadership behaviors and their attitudes toward inclusive practices (behavioral and social) for the sample of this study.

Transformational leaders are defined as those individuals demonstrating behaviors that seek to make change happen in one's self, others, groups, and organization (Avolio & Bass, 1988; Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Bennis, 1989; House & Shamir, 1993; Johanson, 2006). Their behavior is visionary and proactive. With this in mind, it was somewhat anticipated that a significant relationship between the transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive practices among middle school principals in North Carolina would be found.

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Table 2.

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Model for Transformational Leadership Behaviors and Inclusive Practices (behavioral and social)

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	Inclusion
Transformational	.320**
	.005
	75

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*Note.* \*\*Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

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Transactional leadership behaviors were derived from items 1, 3, 4, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 22, 24, 27, and 35 on the MLQ. Attitudes toward inclusive practices scores were



derived from items 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15, and 16 on the ATIES. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to determine if there was a relationship between transactional leadership behaviors and attitudes toward selected inclusive practices as seen in Table 3. In the case of transactional leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive practices,  $r(72) = -.068, p < .05$ . Therefore, it was found that no significant relationship exists between North Carolina middle school principals' transactional leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive practices for this study.

As opposed to transformational leadership behaviors, transactional leadership behaviors reflect a managerial style of leadership (Bensimon, 1989; Brown, Birnstihl, & Wheeler, 1996). Transactional leaders are known for clarifying goals, completing tasks, and compliance via incentives and rewards (Bass, 1985). They maintain order in an organization as opposed to initiating educational reform. Therefore, it appears reasonable that these behaviors were not significantly demonstrated.

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Table 3.

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Model for Transactional Leadership Behaviors and Inclusive Practices (behavioral and social)

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	Inclusion
Transactional	-.068
	.569
	72

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**Discussion**

This study investigated the potential relationship between selected leadership behaviors (transformational and transactional) and attitudes toward selected inclusive practices (behavioral and social) among middle school principals in North Carolina. Analysis of the data in this study revealed a significant relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes toward behavioral and social inclusive practices among middle school principals in North Carolina who participated in this study.

Transformational leadership behaviors such as having a vision and knowing how to attain it and being able to motivate subordinates to transcend their own needs for the betterment of the organization would appear to go hand-in-hand with the types of

changes needed to successfully implement inclusive education. Logically speaking, it takes a leader exhibiting transformational behaviors to successfully orchestrate and effectively maintain a reform as all-encompassing as inclusive education. Therefore, it was anticipated that a significant relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive education (social and behavioral) would exist.

Although existing studies do not specifically address the relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes toward behavioral and social inclusive practices, there are existing studies that support this relationship to some degree. To illustrate, according to The Council of Administrators in Special Education and The National Academy on the Principalship in Special Education (1992):

The success of integration and mainstreaming of special education students relies heavily on an attitude of acceptance from central and building administrators, faculty and staff, students, and community. In the school setting, the principal sets the tone for acceptance by modeling a positive attitude. If the principal's words and actions communicate the value that all children can learn and that they learn best in a natural school setting, it is more likely that the students and the staff will support the students with disabilities and the integrated activities (p.4).

Although the relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes toward behavioral and social inclusive practices among middle school principals in North Carolina did prove significant, its magnitude was considered low ( $r(75) = .320$ ,  $p < .01$ ). A weak correlation between transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive practices among middle school principals in North Carolina may be the result of participants' experiences with various inclusion models. Although the term *inclusive practices* was defined for the participants at the top of the ATIES instrument, principals may have varying experiences with inclusion from which their attitudes were formulated. To illustrate, one principal may be familiar with Wang's Adaptive Learning Environment Model of inclusion that focuses on teaching all students basic skills and simultaneously teaching coping strategies to exceptional children, whereas another principal may be accustomed to collaborative team teaching. Such experiences with different inclusion models may have impacted the participants' responses by suggesting varied frames of reference.

Another reason for a low degree of correlation between transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive practices may be the level of involvement principals have experienced with inclusive practices in their school. If principals have not practiced leadership behaviors directly pertaining to inclusive practices, then their attitude may reflect less significantly on the ATIES. For example, if they have relegated special education related decision-making to their assistant principal(s), transformational principals' attitudes may not be as fully developed, thus resulting in a lower number selection from the Likert scale provided. One last consideration for a low degree of correlation between transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes toward behavioral and social inclusive practices may be that the principals simply did not have a clear understanding of inclusive practices in their school.

Conversely, no significant relationship was determined between transactional leadership behaviors and attitudes toward inclusive practices among middle school principals in North Carolina. Transactional leadership behaviors demonstrate a

managerial style in which the focus is on working within the boundaries of the status quo (AKYA, 2006; Bensimon, 1989; Johanson, 2006). More often, these leadership behaviors are viewed as integral to maintaining an organization (Bass, 1987; Bensimon, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1990) versus creating and executing a vision as is needed for and apparent in leading inclusive schools. Therefore, it may be that a lack of relationship between these two variables is plausible.

Reasons for a lack of significant relationship between transactional leadership behaviors and attitudes toward behavioral and social inclusive practices among middle school principals in North Carolina may be attributed to instrument selection. The ATIES instrument may have caused participants to respond in an “all or nothing” manner to several of its statements. To illustrate, when a participant responded to a statement such as Item 2 *Students who are physically aggressive toward their peers should be in regular class*, he or she is forced to group his or her experiences with all physically aggressive students together. This may prove problematic because some students may exhibit minor physically aggressive behaviors such as occasional pushing or kicking, whereas others may be more aggressive students who habitually bite and hit. Similarly, a lack of definitions for many of the terms used in the instrument (e.g. physically aggressive) could result in misunderstanding by the participants. The author does not define the term “physically aggressive,” leaving the participants to define it for themselves. This could impact how the participants rated their attitudes toward particular behaviors as exhibited by a physically aggressive student in an inclusive setting.

The findings of this study indicated a weak correlation between transformational leadership and attitudes towards inclusive practices and no relationship between transactional leadership behaviors. Such results may prove problematic to educators, posing questions such as: What leadership behaviors are strongly associated with a principal leading a school successfully implementing inclusive practices? How can educational leadership improve inclusive education?

## **Conclusions**

There are virtually no studies that examine the relationship between principals’ leadership behaviors and attitudes toward selected inclusive practices. The findings of this study indicated a statistically significant relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and attitudes towards these selective inclusive practices and no significant relationship between transactional leadership behaviors and attitudes towards these selective inclusive practices.

## **Recommendations for Future Studies**

Findings of this study lead to the following specific recommendations for future research in areas of educational leadership and inclusive education.

1. Participants in this study completed self-rated questionnaires. Responses given by the study participants using the rater form may have been skewed to present the principal in a more favorable manner than actually represent the leadership behavior that he displays. It would be beneficial for principals’

subordinates to complete the rater form version of the MLQ. As opposed to the leader form, the rater form asks subordinates to rate their leaders with respect to transformational and transactional leadership. This might generate a more objective view of the leadership behaviors actually exhibited by principals.

2. It would be advantageous to use other leader instruments in similar studies. Such instruments could examine leadership behaviors displayed by middle school principals in other ways or from different perspectives and thus provide additional information on leadership behaviors and their relationship to inclusive education.
3. Further reliability and validity testing of the ATIES instrument is recommended
4. The development of a new inclusion instrument would be beneficial. A new instrument could allow study participants to respond to items in a broader manner and not group their experiences in an “all or nothing” format as well as provide participants with specific definitions for the each dimension included in the instrument.
5. Using a mixed methodology that employs both quantitative and qualitative methods is recommended. Qualitative data derived from interviews or case studies from middle schools principals and their experiences with inclusive education (behavioral and social) could further support the quantitative findings of this study.
6. It would be beneficial to examine the academic and physical dimensions of inclusion and their possible relationship to attitudes toward inclusive practices. Studying these dimensions could provide administrators with valuable information about how to improve leadership behaviors in such inclusive settings.

As American schools continue to see an increase of students with disabilities being educated in the regular education classroom (Praisner, 2003; Riehl, 2001), investigating the role that leadership behaviors play in the development of successful programming for students with special needs is paramount. Without better understanding of leadership behaviors and their relationship to attitudes toward inclusive practices, educational reform is unable to make critical decisions about the type of leader that is best suited for this population, ill-equipped to provide quality professional development to principals regarding effective inclusive culture, and lacking in providing a significant contribution to existing literature on leadership and special education.

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