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The Chinese Principal Leadership Capacities as Perceived by Master Teachers

Lotfollah Naijar

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The significance of the principal as the most important leader in a school cannot be minimized. Principal leadership is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon, which is considered to be an important element in school functioning. Principal leadership unifies the vision of the entire school community, designs or implements school improvement plans, provides a learning environment consisting of collaborations, seeks partnerships with community stakeholders, and distributes various types of resources for teaching and learning (Elmore 1999). Effective principal leadership is the key to success in creating a vibrant and an innovative environment, and in achieving teaching and learning excellence (Evans and Johnson 1990; Hallinger and Heck 1998; Miskel, Fevurly, and Stewart 1979).

Principal leadership should be constantly reviewed, assessed, and evaluated in order to achieve its continuous improvement. One of the most effective methods in assessing principal leadership is to examine teachers’ perceptions. Teachers’ perceptions of their principal leadership are one of the key variables that affect the productivity of a school as a social organization (Scotti Jr. and Williams 1987). School leadership is a process of social influence whereby the principal as the leader induces teachers as followers to apply their energies and resources toward a collective objective (Chemers and Murphy 1995). Leadership is also regarded as an interactive relationship between leaders and followers, which is characterized by influence and identification (Bolman and Deal 2003). Teachers’ perceptions of their principal leadership behavior reflect such influence and identification. Research indicates that teachers’ perceptions are significantly related to job satisfaction, job-related stress of teachers (Evans and Johnson 1990), and to teachers’ morale (Hunter-Boykin and Evans 1995). Therefore, teachers’ perceptions of their principals indicate the basis to evaluate their principals’ credibility about leadership abilities and quality. Understanding how teachers perceive their principals’ leadership is also important in gaining knowledge about school leaders’ real world practices.

Extensive research has been conducted on principal leadership in the past three decades in Western countries. Leithwood and Montgomery (as cited in Morris 1999) identified three distinct categories of emphasis in which research about school leaders was taking place: (1) general leadership roles of the principal; (2) the role of the principal in the context of school change and implementation of educational innovations; and (3) school effectiveness. Because of its significance, the topic of principal leadership will continue to be a focus in research. However, research in Chinese principal leadership is very limited. Research on principal leadership conducted from the standpoint of teachers’ perceptions is virtually non-existent.

From the perspective of general leadership roles of the principal, this study examined the Chinese principal leadership capacities that are considered crucial in the effectiveness and improvement of schools and school administration through the perceptions of Chinese master teachers in Guangdong, China. This study also determined whether both teachers’ and principals’ demographics affected teachers’ perceptions. In this study, leadership capacity is considered to be a blend of dispositions, knowledge, and skills, which are specified by the American Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) (2002) standards. These dispositions, knowledge, and skills belong not only to the individual but also to the team and the organization.
dimensions (Beck and Murphy 1994; Mullen, Gordon, Greenlee, and Anderson 2002).

The ELCC (2002) standards, which comprehensively describe the elements of principal leadership, were used as the framework of the study, through which Chinese principals’ leadership was investigated from the angle of how the master teachers perceived their principals. The standards serve as school leadership preparation program standards and can be used as a cornerstone for the professional development of existing school administrators (Murphy and Shipman 1998; Murphy, Yff, and Shipman 2000). The standards also provide a framework for the licensure of principals and a common set of guidelines for the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), accreditation of advanced programs in Educational Leadership in America. The ELCC standards categorize principal leadership into six leadership dimensions: school vision, school instruction, school organization, collaborative partnerships, moral perspective, and larger-context politics.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following questions: (1) What are Chinese master teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ leadership capacities related to the American ELCC (2002) educational leadership program standards? (2) Do teachers’ demographic factors of gender, age, and years of teaching experience predict the perceptions of their principals’ leadership capacities? (3) Do principals’ demographic factors of gender, age, years of leadership experience, and education attainment predict the teachers’ perceptions of the principals’ leadership capacities?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of this study were master teachers in Guangdong Province of Southern China. Guangdong is one of the most populated provinces and has been in a leading position in economic development in China in the past twenty years. The master teachers are outstanding in both teaching knowledge and practices in their schools. They had been selected by the Guangdong Department of Education to participate in a professional development program for expert teachers and school administrators. The teachers from different schools were asked to assess their respective principal’s leadership capacities. Of the 174 returned surveys, 173 (99%) contained the necessary information to be used in the study (i.e., valid responses, missing no more than 3 survey items). The demographic information of both the teachers and principals is presented in Table 1.

Instrument

The Principal Leadership Capacities Questionnaire (PLCQ) was created to measure principal leadership capacities based on the framework of the ELCC (2002) standards. The PLCQ included items that were developed from the statements of the six ELCC standards (see Table 2). As shown in Table 2, the 28 PLCQ items provided a representative sampling of the dispositions, skills and knowledge deemed necessary for principals as proposed by the ELCC.

The initial factor analysis and the corresponding scree plot indicated that a two-factor solution fit the data. The first factor identified by the factor analysis had an eigenvalue of 14.55 and accounted for
51.96% of the variance in the PLCQ items. The second factor had an eigenvalue of 1.20 and accounted for 4.29% of the variance in the PLCQ items. The two factors accounted for approximately 56% of the variance in the PLCQ items.

A factor loading cutoff value of .50 was used in the factor analysis. Item 20 which loaded above .50 on both factors was assigned to the factor with the higher loading. The other items were assigned to the factor with the loading higher than .50. The factor loadings for the two-factor solution indicated that the PLCQ items measured two unique constructs: an internal leadership capacity dimension and an external leadership capacity dimension. The internal leadership capacity dimension included Item 1-19, which contained the first three ELCC (2002) standards: leadership capacities in the areas of school vision, school instruction, and school organization. The external leadership capacity dimension included Items 20-28, which contained the last three ELCC standards: leadership capacities in the areas of collaborative partnerships, moral perspective, and larger-context politics.

The reliability estimates using Cronbach alphas for the 19-item internal leadership capacity construct and the 9-item external leadership capacity construct were .96 and .92, respectively. The means of the corrected item-total correlations for both constructs of internal leadership capacities and external leadership capacities were .71 (SD=0.05) and .73 (SD=0.05), respectively.

Procedures of Data Collection

This study used a survey procedure to collect information. The PLCQ was administered to 205 master teachers from all over Guangdong Province who participated in professional development program at a university in Guangzhou, China. The surveys were distributed to different groups of teachers by their group leaders and after one week the surveys were returned to the group leaders. In total, 174 master teachers completed and returned the surveys, providing a return rate of 87%. The teachers were asked to rate their respective principal’s leadership capacity by indicating their level of assessment with each of the PLCQ items on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 representing “having no or little capacity”, 2 representing “having somewhat capacity”, 3 representing “having moderate capacity”, 4 representing “having strong capacity”, and 5 representing “having excellent capacity”.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 13.0 software. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for each of the 28 PLCQ items and the two constructs to determine the Chinese master teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ leadership capacities. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether teachers’ and principals’ demographics predict teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ leadership capacities in each of the two constructs. A .05 alpha level was used to control for Type I errors in the multiple regression analyses.

For regression analysis purpose, dummy variables were created to for all the independent demographic variables, which were categorical. With dummy variables, the t tests tested (see Table 3, 4, 5, 6) specifically the difference between the reference category and each of the other category (ies). Reference and dummy categories in the dependent variables were created to the following teachers’ and principals’ demographics:
Reference category
Dummy category

Female teachers TeacherGenderDummy for male teachers
Younger teachers (21-30), TeacherAgeDummy for older teachers (31-40)
3-6 years of teaching experience TeachYearDummy1 for over 6 to 10 years teaching experience,
TeachYearDummy2 for over 10 years of teaching experience,
Female principals PrincipalGenderDummy for male principals
Younger principals (25-40) PrincipalAgeDummy1 for age of 41-50 PrincipalAgeDummy2 for age of 51-60
3 years or less leadership LeadYearDummy1 for over 3 to 6 years of experience leadership experience
LeadYearDummy2 for over 6 to 10 years of leadership experience
LeadYearDummy3 for over 10 years of leadership experience
Principals without a degree DegreeDummy1 for bachelor’s degrees
DegreeDummy2 for master’s degrees

Results

For Research Question (1), the means and standard deviations for each of the PLCQ items and the constructs are presented in Table 2. Teachers’ perceptions of their principal internal leadership capacities were less positive than their perceptions of the external leadership capacities.

In addressing Research Question (2), multiple regression analysis indicated that the overall model with the teachers’ demographics as independent variables did not significantly predict teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ leadership capacities in the construct of principal internal leadership capacities,
R square = .045,
Adjusted R square = .021,
F(4, 161) = 1.892,
p = .114. Teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ external leadership capacities were not significantly predicted by the other overall model either,
R square = .032,
Adjusted R square = .008,
F(4, 161) = 1.341,
p = .257. Summaries of regression coefficients of the two models are presented in Table 3 and Table 4. These results revealed that there was no significant difference in teachers’ perceptions of their principal internal or external leadership capacities between male and female teachers, older and
younger teachers. However, teachers with over 10 years of teaching experience perceived their principal internal ($t = -2.223, p = .028$) and external ($t = 2.271, p = .024$) leadership capacities to be significantly higher than teachers with shorter teaching experience of three to six years.

Referring to Research Question (3), multiple regression analysis indicated that the overall model with the principals’ demographics as independent variables did not significantly predict teachers’ perceptions of their principals' leadership capacities in the construct of principal internal leadership capacities, $R^2 = .060$, Adjusted $R^2 = .012$, $F(8, 156) = 1.256$, $p = .271$. Another regression indicated that teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ external leadership capacities were not significantly predicted by the overall model either, $R^2 = .087$, Adjusted $R^2 = .040$, $F(8, 156) = 1.857$, $p = .071$. Table 5 and Table 6 summarize the regression coefficients of the two models. These results showed that principals’ gender, age, and years of school leadership experience did not make any significant difference in teachers’ perceptions of principal internal or external leadership capacities. Principals’ educational attainment level seemed to have an effect on teachers’ perceptions. Teachers’ perceptions on internal leadership capacities of their principals who had master’s degrees ($t = 2.069$, $p = .040$) were significantly higher than the perceptions of the principals who did not have a degree. The external leadership capacities of principals who held master’s ($t = 2.451$, $p = .015$) and bachelor’s ($t = 2.289$, $p = .023$) degrees were perceived to be significantly higher than those of principals who did not have a degree.

Discussion

Respondent Perceptions of Principal Leadership Capacities

The results of the study yielded evidence that teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ leadership capacities were somewhat negative. Throughout the PLCQ 28 items, only Item 13 (giving priority to student learning, safety, curriculum, and instruction when developing plans of action) ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.06$), Item 26 (understanding of the policies, laws, and regulations enacted by local, provincial, and central governmental authorities that affect schools) ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.05$) and Item 27 (understanding the economic factors that shape local schools) ( 
M=3.21, SD=1.08) were mostly rated at the level of “having moderate capacities.” All the other 25 items were mostly only at the level of “having somewhat capacities.” Areas of leadership capacities in instruction and school organization were rated the lowest. These findings seemed to be consistent with the result of a study conducted by Hunter-Boykin and Evans (1995) in America that 67% of the principals were rated as ineffective principals by their teachers. Research in Hong Kong also indicated that many of the teachers’ images of the principalship were negative (Lee, Walker, and Bodycott, 2000). There seemed to be a big discrepancy between the principals' capacities and the teachers' expectations. Lack of leadership, failed leadership and poor leadership at schools was one of the key problems faced by the Chinese teachers (Smith 1982). Yeung and Bannister's (1995) study of educational administration in Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong Province, concluded that there was a shortage of experienced administrators.

Internal and External Leadership Capacities

The results of this study revealed the construct of internal leadership capacities (M=2.54, SD=0.77), which contained the leadership in the areas of vision, school culture, instruction, school organization and learning resources, received a rating between having somewhat and moderate capacities. An average level of having moderate or strong capacities was found on the external leadership capacities (M=3.19, SD=0.96), which included collaborative partnerships, moral perspective, and larger-context politics. Although both constructs' mean scores were not high, the external leadership capacity construct was perceived much better than the internal leadership capacity construct. The shortcomings of Chinese principal leadership were perceived by teachers as to be too concerned with the details of administration, which is simply practiced by understanding the Chinese politics, developing the external social relationships, and implementing the relevant policies. The teachers often complained that principals didn't go into classrooms and had lack of instructional leadership (Smith 1982). School, as a small-sized and lower-level organization under the Chinese top-down, hierarchical, and centralized social system, in essence reflects the big picture of Chinese government administration patterns. These patterns emphasize macro-control rather than micro-management, and encourage non-technical management skills rather than creative technical leadership practices. As the social structure can have a profound impact on its members (Robbins 2000), school leadership practices are strongly directed by the external factors coming from the powerful interests, the governmental authoritative selection, and other social forces.

The politicization of education still controls principals' leadership philosophy and practices. The results that the principals' external leadership capacities were much higher than the internal leadership capacities confirmed Agelasto’s (1997) seven-year research on politics and education in a Chinese university. Politics has consumed the attention of school leaderships. Principal in-service training programs in China also strongly focus on moral and ethical issues closely connected to politics (Su, Adams, and Mininberg 2000). Politically correct behavior characterized the administration of education at school, with a consequent perceived decline in educational quality. Evaluating school leadership including principal leadership in China is subject to some political constraints, although people in Guangdong are more familiar with the Western ideas than those in other regions (Yeung and Bannister
Demographics and Perceptions of Leadership Capacities

The results of this study revealed that the gender factor of both master teachers and their principals did not significantly impact Chinese master teacher perceptions of both their principals’ internal and external leadership capacities. This finding matched the notion that gender did not influence principal leadership performance and teachers’ perceptions, which was supported by some research in America (Guzzetti and Martin 1984; LoVette, Holland, and McCall 1999; Zheng 1996) although many studies concluded that female principal leadership style was more democratic than male principal leadership style (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee 1982; Fauth 1984; Gilbertson 1981; Pitner 1981).

The time-related factor including age of master teachers, age of their principals, and principal leadership experiences did not influence teachers’ perceptions of both their principals’ internal and external leadership capacities. These results seemed to suggest that principal age and leadership experience that have been Chinese government’s concern about their impacts on leadership effectiveness are not an important issue. Before the 1990s, the Chinese government promoted middle-aged or senior teachers in school leadership positions because of their enriched experiences and the stability of their leadership abilities derived year-by-year work at school. The older qualifiers were believed to be more effective in school leadership because they were more experienced. In the past decade, the Chinese government has been implementing a policy of transforming governmental administrators including school leaders by replacing the aged leaders with the younger ones. Many young people were promoted into the leadership positions based on their practical skills, refreshed knowledge, and eagerness for change. The relationship between leadership capacities and principals’ age and experience is a complicated contextual issue. More research with larger samples and different contexts is needed on the appropriateness of implementing the policy of replacing school leadership positions based upon candidates’ age and experience.

The findings revealed that principals with higher education attainment level were perceived to have higher leadership in both internal and external capacities. Leaders are not just born, but also need to learn. The importance of effective leadership training was apparent in preparing capable school leaders (Kraus and Cordeiro 1995). However, most of principals in China did not receive systematic leadership training such as educational administration endorsement or degree programs. In Guangdong Province with the population of 70 million people, there are currently only two universities that are authorized to confer master’s degree in educational administration. Lack of leadership training and degree programs in educational administration contributes to the poor leadership capacities.

Summary and Recommendations

The results of this quantitative study add to the research findings on how teachers perceive their principals’ leadership capacities. The results also contribute to the large body of school leadership literature by adding the Chinese cultural perspectives. On the other hand, it provides evidence to understand the situations of Chinese principal leadership capacities compared to the American educational leadership program standards. Although the results do not surprise many educators in China, they provide valuable information based on the empirical study for both educators and government who are exerting more and more efforts in the improvement of education in China. In both the internal and external leadership capacities, it is not encouraging to see that the internal leadership
capacities are lower than the external leadership capacities. Internal leadership capacities in the areas of visionary, instructional, and organizational leadership are the foundations of school productivity in students’ learning. First of all, a primary avenue of influence was the principal’s role in shaping the school’s direction through vision (Hallinger and Heck 1998). Principal leadership influences student learning outcomes by the paths of school goals, and school organizational structure and culture. On the other hand, schools in which students achieve are led by principals who make a significant and measurable contribution to the teaching and learning practices (Andrew and Soder 1987; Bossert et al. 1982, Murphy and Hallinger, 1992). Fullan (2002) also suggested that at the heart of school capacity are principals emphasizing the development of teachers’ knowledge and skills, professional community, program coherence, and technical resources. Lack of leadership and poor leadership at schools seem to have its commonality in China. It is an urgent and important task to upgrade principal leadership capacities. From the policy perspective, various levels of governments should develop and implement enforced and specific policies on principal preparation, selection, evaluation, and in-service training, focusing on the shift from leadership skills based on politics to principals’ technical skills in visionary, instructional, and organizational leadership. The principalship should take the road of professionalism and licensure. On the other hand, systematic training including preparation programs should be extensively developed and promoted. School leadership skills can be learned and practiced with efforts and clear visions of what must be accomplished. These skills come from the principal’s knowledge of the school or district and what is needed to be done to improve education for all students (Delapp 1988). Training programs should focus on practical leadership knowledge, abilities and skills instead of the traditional theory-based study.

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Table 1: 
Demographic Information of Teachers (n=173) and Principals (n=173)

Teachers’ Gender: Male Female
31% 69%

Teachers’ Age: 21-30 31-40
49% 51%

Teachers’ Years of Teaching:
3 to 6 years Over 6 to 10 years Over 10 years
41% 34% 25%

Principals’ Gender: Male Female
88% 12%

Principals’ Age: 25-40 41-50 51-60
19% 41% 40%

Principal Years of Leadership Experience:
3 years or less Over 3 to 6 years Over 6 to 10 years Over 10 years
31% 35% 16% 18%

Principal Education Attainment:
Master’s Degree Bachelor’s degree Some College
School level:

Elementary school  Middle school  Senior high school  Secondary (7-12) school

Table 2:
Means and standard deviations on the PLCQ items and constructs (N=173)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLCQ items and constructs</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership in school vision (Standard 1)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Develop a vision of learning for our school that promotes 2.49</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the success of all students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Communicate the vision to staff, parents, students, and    2.65</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community members through effective skills.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Use effective strategies to implement the vision.          2.69</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership in school instruction (Standard 2)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Promote positive school culture.                           2.60</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Facilitate activities that apply principles of effective   2.38</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>instruction to improve instructional practices and curricular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>materials.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Use and promote technology and information systems to      2.76</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enrich and improve curriculum and instruction.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Apply human development theory and motivational theories   2.39</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to the learning process.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Be fully aware of learners’ diverse needs and accommodate 2.31</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their needs and accommodate their needs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
needs.

9. Implement effective professional development programs based on reflective practice and the needs of teachers.

Leadership in school organization (Standard 3)

10. Optimize the learning environment by applying appropriate models and principles of organizational development and management.

11. Optimize the learning environment with attention to indicators of equity, effectiveness, and efficiency.

12. Develop plans of action for focusing on effective organization.

13. Give priority to student learning, safety, curriculum, and instruction when developing plans of action.

14. Manage time effectively.

15. Deploy financial and human resources in ways that promote student achievement.

16. Involve staff in conducting school operations.

17. Use group process skills to build consensus, communicate, and resolve conflicts.

18. Allocate and use fiscal, human, and material resources effectively legally, and equitably.

19. Focus the use of resources on teaching and learning.

Leadership in collaborative partnership (Standard 4)
20. Bring together the resources of family members and the community to positively affect student learning.

21. Use public resources and funds appropriately and effectively to encourage communities to provide new resources.

22. Collaborate with agencies, families and other community members. Leadership in moral perspective (Standard 5)

23. Respect the rights of others. Leadership in larger-context politics (Standard 6)

24. Treat students fairly.

25. Make and explain decisions based upon ethical and legal principles.

26. Demonstrate an understanding of the policies, laws, and regulations enacted by local, provincial, and central governmental authorities that affect schools.

27. Demonstrate an understanding of the economic factors that shape local schools.

28. Fully consider political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context in school policy development and school operation.

Construct of internal leadership capacities

Construct of external leadership capacities

Table 3: Coefficients for teachers’ demographics as independent variables of the internal leadership capacity construct
Table 4: Coefficients for teachers’ demographics as independent variables of the external leadership capacity construct

Table 5: Coefficients for principals’ demographics as independent variables of the internal leadership capacity construct
Table 6: Coefficients for principals' demographics as independent variables of the external leadership capacity construct

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LeadYearDummy1</td>
<td>-.232</td>
<td>.151</td>
<td>-1.531</td>
<td>.128</td>
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<tr>
<td>LeadYearDummy2</td>
<td>-.030</td>
<td>.195</td>
<td>-0.153</td>
<td>.879</td>
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<tr>
<td>LeadYearDummy3</td>
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<td>.193</td>
<td>0.458</td>
<td>.648</td>
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<td>.144</td>
<td>1.763</td>
<td>.080</td>
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<tr>
<td>DegreeDummy2</td>
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<td>.248</td>
<td>2.069</td>
<td>.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AgeDummy1</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.212</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>.877</td>
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<tr>
<td>AgeDummy2</td>
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<td>.235</td>
<td>0.304</td>
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<td>GenderDummy</td>
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<td>-1.278</td>
<td>.203</td>
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<tr>
<td>LeadYearDummy1</td>
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<td>.184</td>
<td>-1.017</td>
<td>.311</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.190</td>
<td>.234</td>
<td>0.813</td>
<td>.417</td>
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<tr>
<td>LeadYearDummy3</td>
<td>.332</td>
<td>.240</td>
<td>1.384</td>
<td>.168</td>
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<td>DegreeDummy1</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td>.176</td>
<td>2.451</td>
<td>.015</td>
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<tr>
<td>DegreeDummy2</td>
<td>.692</td>
<td>.302</td>
<td>2.289</td>
<td>.023</td>
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