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Academic Leadership Journal

Leadership Differences Between African-American and White Superintendents in South Carolina

Issues: Winter 2011 - Volume 9 Issue 1
Posted On 2011-04-21 07:28:00
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Background

Superintendents are responsible for implementing the policies established by their boards of education. They are charged with managing and leading their organizations to secure and promote the sustained advancement of student achievement. Nationwide, whites are employed in a majority of superintendent positions (Glass, 2006). According to Bjork (2000), blacks represent 5% of the superintendents in America. The remaining 95% are white. Previous studies of the superintendency have researched career paths, school board/superintendent relationships, minority superintendents, gender, leadership styles, and professional preparation (Glass, 2006; Clisbee, 2004; Revere, 2003 Lunenburg, 2003; Tallerico, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1999; Moody, 1970). None, however, have compared possible leadership practice differences between black and white superintendents.

Gender, years of experience, and the size of the superintendents’ respective school districts have become topics of study regarding their effect on the leadership behaviors of educational administrators. The author located studies which examined gender-based biases in the superintendency, in addition to studies which examined the career paths of blacks and women in the superintendency (Clisbee, 2004; Grogan 1999). Also, several studies have compared the leadership behaviors and career paths of male and female superintendents (Shakeshaft, 1999). Although the number of studies focusing on differences in leadership practices of women and men has increased, the author was unable to locate any South Carolina studies which analyzed differences in the leadership practices of black and white superintendents.

The phenomena of blacks aspiring to the superintendency changed as schools and communities were desegregated as a result of the landmark Brown v. Topeka Board of Education court case in 1954. The court ordered desegregation of public schools provided black administrators with opportunities to obtain superintendencies in mixed-race public school districts. Whites also relocated to the suburbs leaving blacks in urban and rural areas with opportunities to obtain positions in teaching and administration. The American Association of School Administrators report, in Women and Racial Minority Representation in School Administration (1993), stated that superintendents of different racial backgrounds tend to serve in areas where persons of the same race live in significant numbers (Glass, 2000). Thus, the assignment of black superintendents to districts with predominantly black student and community populations was primarily due to ’white flight’ as white administrators focused on obtaining positions in the suburbs (Gewertz, 2006).
The first study of black school superintendents was conducted by Charles Moody in his dissertation titled Black Superintendents in Public School Districts: Trends and Conditions (1970). Moody surveyed school districts that hired blacks and conducted interviews with each of the black superintendents at that time. Moody concluded that increases in the number of black superintendents during the 1970s were due to the desegregation of schools, particularly in the south. Moody also noted that the number of black superintendents continued to increase as the black student population increased in urban areas.

Barbara Sizemore’s The Limits of the Superintendency: A Review of the Literature (1985), discusses the evolution of the education of blacks and their struggles in education. Sizemore documented that the emergence of the black administrator was a direct result of the Brown decision. Sizemore also reviewed literature which details the results of studies and surveys conducted over a twenty-year period that identified roles and expectations of black superintendents regarding supervisory, administrative, curricular and political processes. Her review repeatedly revealed that black superintendents served in districts with a non-white student population majority, a non-white school board, and a non-white teaching staff. A substantial increase in black administrators occurred in all black districts in the South between 1930 and 1958 (Sizemore, 1985).

Demographics of South Carolina Superintendents

There are eighty-five superintendents in the state of South Carolina, excluding the superintendents of juvenile justice and charter schools (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2009). At the time of this 2009 study, blacks comprised 26% of the superintendents in South Carolina while whites comprised 74% (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2009). There were twelve black male superintendents and ten black female superintendents. The white superintendent population was comprised of forty-six males and seventeen females (South Carolina Department of Education, August, 2009). Per capita, blacks comprise 33% of the total population in the state of South Carolina (2000 Census). Thus, the percentage of black superintendents is less than the representation of blacks in the state of South Carolina.

In 2009, there were three black superintendents leading majority white school districts in South Carolina. Those school districts are demographically located in the region of South Carolina referred to as the Upstate. The largest majority white school district in the upstate is led by a black female superintendent who has held the position for five years. There are also two black male superintendents leading their respective districts where white children are the majority. They represent a tax base that is much higher than their counterparts in many school districts located in regions known as the Midlands and Low Country.

Demographic projections indicate that, by the year 2020, one-third of the nation will be non-white, and the proportion of minority students in American schools will increase to 38% (Bjork, 2000; Glass, 2000). Currently, black superintendents employed in the United States serve mostly in large urban districts or in small rural towns in which the school districts are majority black, have low tax bases, and low student academic achievement (Bjork, 2000). “Few would argue the general pattern of superintendent placement is in alignment with district racial composition” (Glass, 2006).

Some believe that leadership occurs best when leaders and the people they lead have similar values, while others believe that effective leadership occurs when leaders and the people they lead have
different values (Thomas & Bainbridge, 2002). The one fact that is most certainly true is that one cannot lead if there are no followers, regardless of race, experience, or school district demographics. According to Thomas and Bainbridge, black and white superintendents can be successful in predominantly black or white public school districts if they are in the right place at the right time. It is difficult to explicitly define good leadership or identify the best leadership style for any one superintendent because leadership itself is situational and changes with individuals and actions (Vroom & Jago, 2007).

**Problem and Questions**

Specifically, the authors explored whether there were any self-perceived leadership practice differences between black and white superintendents in the state of South Carolina. School districts in the south experienced a large loss of black teachers after the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954.

“In 1954, the year of the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, approximately 82,000 African American teachers were responsible for the education of the nation’s two million African-American public school students. A decade later, over 38,000 black teachers and administrators had lost their positions in 17 southern and border states. Between 1975 and 1985, the number of black students majoring in education declined by 66% and another 21,515 black teachers lost their jobs between 1984 and 1989 (Hudson and Holmes, 1994, p. 388).”

A large number of black teachers found themselves displaced as a result of desegregation. The significant decrease in the pool of black teachers equated to very low numbers of blacks in the pipeline to aspire to and obtain the superintendency. It has been documented that a town in Florida fired all its black teachers (even though some of the teachers held master’s degrees) and the less qualified white teachers retained their jobs (Tillman, 2000). The Office of Civil Rights report of 1975 reported that six white teachers were employed for each black teacher in the South during 1970-1971 and 1975-1976 (Tillman, 2000).

There is very little data regarding the history of black school superintendents after the Brown decision. According to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), race was not a category for superintendents until 1982 (Tillman, 2000). Tallerico (2000) stated that data regarding superintendents has infrequently been disaggregated by race, gender, or ethnicity. Researchers (Bjork, 2000; Brunner, 2000; Tallerico, 1999) have all spoken to the need for more comparative studies of the superintendency. A better understanding of differences in leadership behaviors may allow for more successful matching of the district needs to superintendents.
The authors designed guiding quantitative and qualitative research questions to determine how black and white superintendents perceived their leadership practices and if those differences were related to their race. Quantitatively, the author asked questions including “What are the self-perceived leadership practices between black and white superintendents in South Carolina?”

The qualitative research question was designed to ascertain any leadership practice differences: “Do black and white superintendents draw upon different skills to perform their jobs”?

**Methodology**

This mixed methods study explored differences in self-reported leadership practices between black and white superintendents in South Carolina based on their race. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were needed to answer the research questions addressed in the study. Eighty-four superintendents were invited to participate in the study. One district was not included in to avoid potential researcher positional bias.

The instrument used to assess leadership preferences is comprised of questions addressing the five exemplary leadership practices advocated by Dr. James Kouzes and Dr. Barry Z. Posner (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Kouzes and Posner’s research led to the identification of five core leadership practices necessary for leaders to exhibit exemplary leadership.

The independent variable was race. The dependent variables were Kouzes and Posner’s five practices of exemplary leadership: 1) Modeling the Way; 2) Inspiring a Shared Vision; 3) Challenging the Process; 4) Enabling Others to Act and; 5) Encouraging the Heart. The study was not designed to identify a single best superintendent leadership practice.

The rate of return for the LPI-Self survey was 63%. Fourteen black superintendents and thirty six white superintendents returned the LPI survey. Three surveys were returned incomplete.

**Quantitative Results**

LPI categories are abbreviated as follows: Modeling The Way – MTW; Inspiring a Shared Vision – ISV; Challenging the Process – CP; Enabling Others to Act – EO; Encouraging the Heart – ETH.

**Table 1**

*LPI – Self Results for All Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MTW</th>
<th>ISV</th>
<th>CP</th>
<th>EO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ETH</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>50.92</td>
<td>50.89</td>
<td>53.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.96</td>
<td>52.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>5.459</td>
<td>6.191</td>
<td>3.698</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.264</td>
<td>5.129</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>40-60</td>
<td>29-60</td>
<td>47-60</td>
<td>47-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>40-60</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A total of fifty participants (63%) returned valid LPI surveys via email or through U.S. mail. The mean scores for the leadership practices of Modeling the Way and Inspiring a Shared Vision were 50.92 and 50.89 respectively. The average score for Encouraging the Heart was 52.13. The average scores for Challenging the Process and Enabling Others to Act were 53.53 and 54.96. The range scores reflected a thirty-one point difference for Inspiring a Shared Vision while there was only an thirteen point difference for Challenging the Process and Enabling Others to Act.

Superintendents scored Enabling Others to Act as the leadership practice they employed most. They scored Challenging the Process and Encouraging the Heart as the second and third ranked leadership practices. Superintendents ranked Modeling the Way and Inspiring a Shared Vision, in that order, as the leadership practices they employed least.

Table 2 presents the results of white superintendents who returned the LPI survey. Thirty-six white superintendents returned the LPI survey.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETH</th>
<th>MTW</th>
<th>ISV</th>
<th>CP</th>
<th>EO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>49.69</td>
<td>49.31</td>
<td>53.31</td>
<td>54.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.53</td>
<td>50.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>5.296</td>
<td>6.346</td>
<td>3.413</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.176</td>
<td>4.672</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>40-59</td>
<td>29-56</td>
<td>47-60</td>
<td>47-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>40-60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The means scores for Modeling the Way and Inspiring a Shared Vision were 49.69 and 49.31 respectively. The mean score for Challenging the Process was 53.31 and the mean score for Enabling Others to Act was 54.53. The resulting mean score for Encouraging the Heart was 50.94. The median score was 51.90 for all categories.

Table 3 presents the results of black superintendents who returned the LPI survey. Fourteen black superintendents completed the LPI survey.

Table 3
**LPI – Self Results for Black Superintendents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETH</th>
<th>MTW</th>
<th>ISV</th>
<th>CP</th>
<th>EO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>54.00</td>
<td>54.43</td>
<td>54.86</td>
<td>54.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56.29</td>
<td>54.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>4.804</td>
<td>4.669</td>
<td>3.780</td>
<td>5.352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.292</td>
<td>5.352</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>47-60</td>
<td>45-60</td>
<td>49-60</td>
<td>51-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>42-60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The range of mean scores for the dependent variables were between 54.00 and 56.00. The resulting mean score for Modeling the Way was 54.00 and the mean score for Inspiring a Shared Vision was 54.43. The mean score for Challenging the Process was 54.86. The mean score for Enabling Others to Act was 56.29. The mean score for Encouraging the Heart was 54.79. The median score for all of the dependent variables was 55.00.

Black superintendents scored Enabling Others to Act as the leadership practice they employ most. They scored Challenging the Process and Encouraging The Heart as the second and third most important leadership practices. Black superintendents ranked Inspiring a Shared Vision and Modeling the Way, in that order, as the leadership practices employed least.

The LPI quantitative results reflected more similarities than differences in the leadership practices of black and white superintendents in South Carolina. Black and white superintendents ranked their first, second, and third most employed leadership practices in the same order. The quantitative research determined that the self-perceived leadership practices of South Carolina black and white superintendents were not significantly affected by their race.

**Qualitative Results**

In late January 2010 and early February 2010, ten superintendents who had responded were selected for interviews. Their selection for the qualitative analysis was based on their LPI survey results and their willingness to participate. The researcher compiled a list of key words and phrases, from the interview responses, to identify common themes that emerged from each interview question. The common themes were color-coded for purposes of cross-referencing interview responses to the race, district size, and current years of experience of the superintendents. The superintendents were presented with the following questions:

1. How has the racial make-up of your district’s schools and communities framed your leadership practices?

2. Are your self-reported LPI survey results consistent with your personal beliefs of the leadership practices you employ? Are you surprised by your results?
3. How do you define your leadership practices through the lens of race as a superintendent?

4. Which “personal best” leadership practice would you rank as most important? Why?

5. Which “personal best” leadership practice would you rank as least important? Why?

1. Superintendents are viewed as being visionaries, yet Inspiring a Shared Vision was rated as the least important leadership practice by superintendents in South Carolina. Why do you think this is true?

Data gathered from the ten superintendent interviews provided the qualitative findings for the second research question: Do black and white superintendents draw upon different skills to perform their jobs?

Of the superintendents interviewed, two were black females and two were white females. Three superintendents were black males and three superintendents were white males. Of the ten interviewed, five superintendents were veterans and five were novice superintendents. Four superintendents were from large districts and six superintendents were from small districts.

The researcher conducted a pilot of the interview questions with retired superintendents from South Carolina. The pilot assisted the researcher in the design and refinement of the interview questions. The open response, semi-structured interviews afforded the researcher the opportunity to analyze the data through comparison of interviews to superintendents’ self-reported leadership data, comparisons of interview between black and white superintendents, and LPI comparisons. Follow-up interview questions were posed to gain more in-depth understanding of the participants’ viewpoints and experiences regarding the affects of race, and experience on their leadership practices.

Analysis of the interview data revealed themes related to the reviewed literature on leadership practices including 1) superintendent Leadership and 2) often transformational leadership. The response to the interview questions mirrored the interviewed superintendents’ LPI results.

**Overall Themes for Qualitative Interview Questions**

The superintendent interview results were generally similar and two common themes were apparent. Themes mentioned one to two times by interviewed superintendents were considered to have a low frequency. Themes mentioned more than five times were considered to have a high frequency.

1. How has the racial make-up of your district’s schools and communities framed your leadership practices?

The common themes among black and white superintendents, novice and veteran superintendents, and superintendents from large and small districts for interview question one were 1) leadership is very situational, and 2) race does impact leadership practices in communicating fairness and consistency. Nine superintendents indicated that communicating effectively to ensure fairness and consistency, a high frequency theme mentioned in all interviews, is essential to removing potential thoughts of racial bias from their decisions.
2. Are yourself-reported LPI survey results consistent with your personal beliefs of the leadership practices you employ? Are you surprised by your results?

In response to interview question two, all interviewed superintendents stated their LPI results were generally consistent with their personal beliefs regarding their leadership practices.

3. How do you define your leadership practices through the lens of race as a superintendent?

The interview results for question three were similar to the results for question one. A common high frequency theme stated in question three was sensitivity, mentioned seven times, among interviewed superintendents in regards to effective leadership skills they drew upon. Six superintendents spoke of the need to "be sensitive to the concerns of people and where they’re from. Affluent parents who are black or white should not be treated any differently than black or white parents who are not well educated and who are less fortunate."

4. Which "personal best" leadership practice would you rank as most important? Why?

All interviewed superintendent responses to interview question four were very similar with common high frequency themes. Enabling Others to Act was the leadership practice eight superintendents deemed most important. The high frequency themes identified by superintendents in question four were 1) delegating responsibilities to others is very important and 2) permitting others to do their jobs by trial and error as that is how they learn. The phrases delegating responsibility and allowing others to do their jobs without interference were mentioned on nine separate occasions by different superintendents.

5. Which "personal best" leadership practice would you rank as least important?

Nine superintendents stated Inspiring a Shared Vision was the leadership practice they ranked as least important. The common high frequency themes for interview question five were 1) we are not all on the same page; 2) some superintendents are more autocratic than they realize; and 3) the other four leadership practices are more important.

When asked follow-up questions about their personal beliefs regarding Inspiring a Shared Vision, the majority of superintendents stated the focus placed on establishing and implementing a district-wide vision and mission are not as important today as it was ten to fifteen years ago.

6. Superintendents are viewed as being visionaries, yet Inspiring A Shared Vision was rated as the least important leadership practice by superintendents in South Carolina. Why do you think this is true?

The response to interview question six were almost identical for all superintendents. The common high frequency themes for interview question six were 1) Inspiring a Shared Vision is too hard to do and 2) the other four leadership practices are more important to the success of my organization than Inspiring
a Shared Vision. An item by item analysis of the LPI survey results revealed that superintendents rated Inspiring a Shared Vision a leadership practice they employed rarely, once in a while, or occasionally. Novice and veteran superintendents LPI results were identical. They ranked Enabling Others to Act the leadership practice they employed most while they ranked Challenging the Process, Encouraging the Heart, and Modeling the Way as the second, third, and fourth most employed practices. Inspiring a Shared Vision ranked the leadership practice they employed least.

So, do black and white superintendents draw upon different skills to perform their jobs? There were both similarities and differences among the interviewed superintendents. All ten superintendents agreed that their LPI survey results were consistent with their personal beliefs regarding leadership practices. The interviews indicated that superintendents emphasized creating environments of trust and facilitating quality relationships to foster collaboration. The ten superintendents freely spoke of their individual leadership skills and their inability to Encourage the Heart and Inspire a Shared Vision in their district and community.

Even though the interviewed superintendents acknowledged that they intentionally exerted little effort to Encouraging the Heart, their collective LPI results presented this leadership practice to be the third most employed practice. Their quantitative and qualitative responses were somewhat contradictory because they stated during interviews that Encouraging the Heart was not particularly important to them. The interviewed superintendents utilized the leadership practices that they believed yielded the best results in their districts. The majority of superintendents stated that Inspiring a Shared Vision was not particularly a relevant leadership skill to them, considering the challenges they faced in managing their district and improving student achievement. When posed follow-up questions about the LPI results for Inspiring a Shared Vision, those superintendents stated that the remaining leadership practices of Challenging the Process, Modeling the Way, and Enabling Others to Act, were more result oriented and simply more important to them.

The leadership differences between the interviewed superintendents were mostly subtle but occasionally blatant. Two white superintendents stated that race had nothing to do with leadership and they never perceived leadership in terms of race. Two black superintendents stated that race had no direct impact on their decisions but they were cognizant of its presence. Three black superintendents indicated the racial make-up of their districts and communities impacted their leadership practices. White superintendents stated the racial make-up of their district schools and communities did not influence their leadership practices but they utilize extra caution when making decisions which may have racial implications. A veteran white superintendent stated that “it (race) does not impact my decisions…..but it does in a way because sometimes people don’t trust you…sometimes you’ve got to be able to encourage trust. I try to understand that I’ve never been anything but white so I try to put myself in the other person’s position. You have to deal with everything on a situational basis. You have to deal with race…you’ll be better off as a superintendent”. The interviews with the ten superintendents yielded two high frequency common themes.

The common themes drawn from the superintendent interview responses were: 1) leadership is situational; 2) fairness and consistency are particularly important because of the need to be sensitive to the concerns of all people and their backgrounds. The veteran superintendents were more frank than the novice superintendents in stating their responses. The novice superintendents seemed more deliberate and reserved with their answers. The average length of the veteran superintendent
interviews were sixty minutes. The average length of the novice superintendent interviews were 30 minutes.

At the onset of the interviews, the superintendents' initial responses revealed that they perceive their leadership practices to be transformational. Their responses to more in-depth follow-up questions indicated that, in practice, the superintendents' leadership practices are actually more transactional.

The interview results affirmed the need for colorblind discussions. Politically correct responses regarding race were initially given to the first and third interview questions. The use of follow-up questions served to increase the superintendents' comfort levels with the researcher which resulted in more in-depth free responses.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the leadership practice differences between black and white superintendents in South Carolina. The researcher explored the impact of superintendents’ race during follow-up interviews. Review of the descriptive data indicated that the self-perceived leadership practices of South Carolina black and white superintendents were not significantly different.

Black and white superintendents ranked their first, second, and third most employed leadership practices in the same order. Interviews with ten superintendents revealed similarities in the leadership skills between black and white superintendents. The qualitative interviews revealed that some superintendents are more transactional in their perspective while others are more transformational.

As stated in the interviews, superintendents’ self-reported LPI survey results were generally consistent with their personal beliefs of the leadership practices they employed. Although their LPI results indicated that race did not significantly impact superintendent leadership practices, depending on the situation, the majority of interviewed superintendents stated the racial make-up of their district and communities did help frame their leadership behavior. In theory, all superintendents communicated transformational leadership qualities in their LPI results but in practice they often communicated transactional leadership qualities in their interviews.

The leadership skills that black and white superintendents utilize are apparent to them, to each other, and generally consistent with their quantitative responses. The interviewed superintendents were committed to building relationships and providing professional growth for members of their organization. In theory, all superintendents communicated transformational leadership qualities in their LPI surveys; however in practice they communicated more transactional leadership qualities during interviews.

References


The study of the American School Superintendents 2000: A Look At the


South Carolina Department of Education, ed.sc.gov


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