

Theories of Leadership: Where Do We Stand?

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SELDOM have events called more forcefully for effective leadership throughout the American republic in general, and its vast educational enterprise in particular, than have those of the past decade. Political, social, economic, and philosophical upheaval across the nation is reflected in conflicts over school busing to achieve racial integration, moves to establish both rights and responsibilities of students, struggles by teacher groups to establish themselves as forces in decision making, and broad-based urgings to return to traditional curricula.

From 1968 to the present, leaders at all levels and in all types of institutions have been confronted by many and sometimes conflicting demands. Public education has provided a particularly active arena in which forces do battle. Faced with such circumstances, those in leadership roles—administrators, curriculum directors, instructional supervisors, and selected teachers—have sought to maintain those elusive qualities that allow one person to command, control, or influence others.

As a guide to action, some educators have turned to theoretical explanations of leadership. They have found that beliefs regarding the phenomenon of leadership have been revised considerably since the turn of the century. Early studies of leadership focused upon characteristics of the indi-

Reported here are findings from a comprehensive examination of research in leadership theory in several fields outside of education. From these studies the author and his colleagues have derived certain "propositions" in relation to instructional supervisory behavior.

vidual. Attempts were made to determine if certain traits of personality, intelligence, physique, or perception were either necessarily associated with those who lead or could be used to distinguish those who might become leaders. Despite the determination of researchers to fully explore the relationships, evidence is clear that leaders do not possess common characteristics, traits, or consistent patterns thereof. Nor is it possible to predict potential for leadership on the basis of personality, intelligence, stature, or scholarship.

Disappointed by their search for traits of the leader, researchers next sought to identify particular styles of leadership as clues for individual effectiveness. Numerous studies were conducted which hypothesized relationships between selected leadership styles and productivity or morale. Although some interesting results were obtained, particularly in comparison of autocratic, laissez-

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faire, and democratic styles, they did not prove any more fruitful in explaining leadership. Different styles of leadership develop different climates and patterns of achievement in the same group or in similar groups. Evidence indicates that the leadership style perceived as effective is that which is consonant with the nature and expectations of the group to be led.

This consideration of leadership style in association with the performance of functions by group members led to examination of the interaction between group members and the leader. Analysis of this area of investigation, group dynamics, has contributed much to the contemporary approach to the study of leadership. When the effectiveness of leadership in helping meet their needs is evaluated by group members themselves, leadership necessarily must be considered as a quality separate from a single individual. Some functions likely will be performed by members who emerge as temporary leaders from within the group as well as by the designated leader.

A still more recent consideration of leadership recognizes the significance of the particular situation in which acts of leadership occur. Study of the organizational determinants of leadership reveals that among them are the nature of environment, distribution of power, nature of tasks, and priority among goals. Effective leadership is the product of multiple conditions within an organization. To be effective, leadership must be both consistent with organizational expectations and beneficial to organizational goals.

Examination of professional literature from 1968 to the present evidences a broadening interest in defining theories of leadership and in relating these theories to leadership specifically identified with administration, curriculum, instruction, and supervision.

A computer search of ERIC, psychological abstracts, and sociological abstracts for this period provided a quantitative view of recent scholarly efforts. A manual search of the dissertation abstracts for the years 1968 to 1975 identified other investigations



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of leadership. The descriptors used in gathering data for both types of searches were leadership, administration, curriculum, instruction, and supervision.

Two hundred citations related to leadership were obtained from ERIC from January 1968 through September 1975. Twenty citations clearly identified with leadership appeared in the psychological abstracts for this same period. A search of sociological abstracts produced no citations that focused on leadership. The citations for administration, curriculum, instruction, and supervision were arranged by year and type of publication (article, monograph, book, or dissertation). The results are presented in Figure 1.

A statistical histogram was developed for each of the four leadership areas (administration, curriculum, instruction, and supervision). A summary histogram represents collective activity in the four areas on a yearly basis.

Data Analysis

The data suggest that in general there has been increased attention to leadership in each of the four areas of administration, curriculum, instruction, and supervision. The overall increase of leadership literature was 126 percent in the past four years (1972-

1975), compared to the previous four years (1968-1972). The area of curriculum experienced the largest new emphasis on leadership with a 278 percent increase during the last four years.

Over the eight years 1968 to 1975, the area of administration alone accounted for 40 percent of all literature on leadership. The area of curriculum comprised 25 percent of the literature on leadership during this period. The area of supervision made up 18 percent and the area of instruction made up 17 percent.

A striking factor is the increased emphasis on instructional leadership during 1972 and 1973, followed by a decline in 1973 and 1974. Much of this expression appeared in books and monographs rather than journal articles. The emphasis on supervisory leadership in 1972 and 1973 continued into 1974 with journals and monographs and was succeeded by several new textbooks early in 1975.

A review of doctoral dissertations in education from 1968 through 1974 illustrates the trend away from the traits of the leader toward a broader view of leadership. Attention to traits to explain leadership declined sharply while emphasis on characteristics shifted from intellect and personality to attitude, particularly receptivity to change.

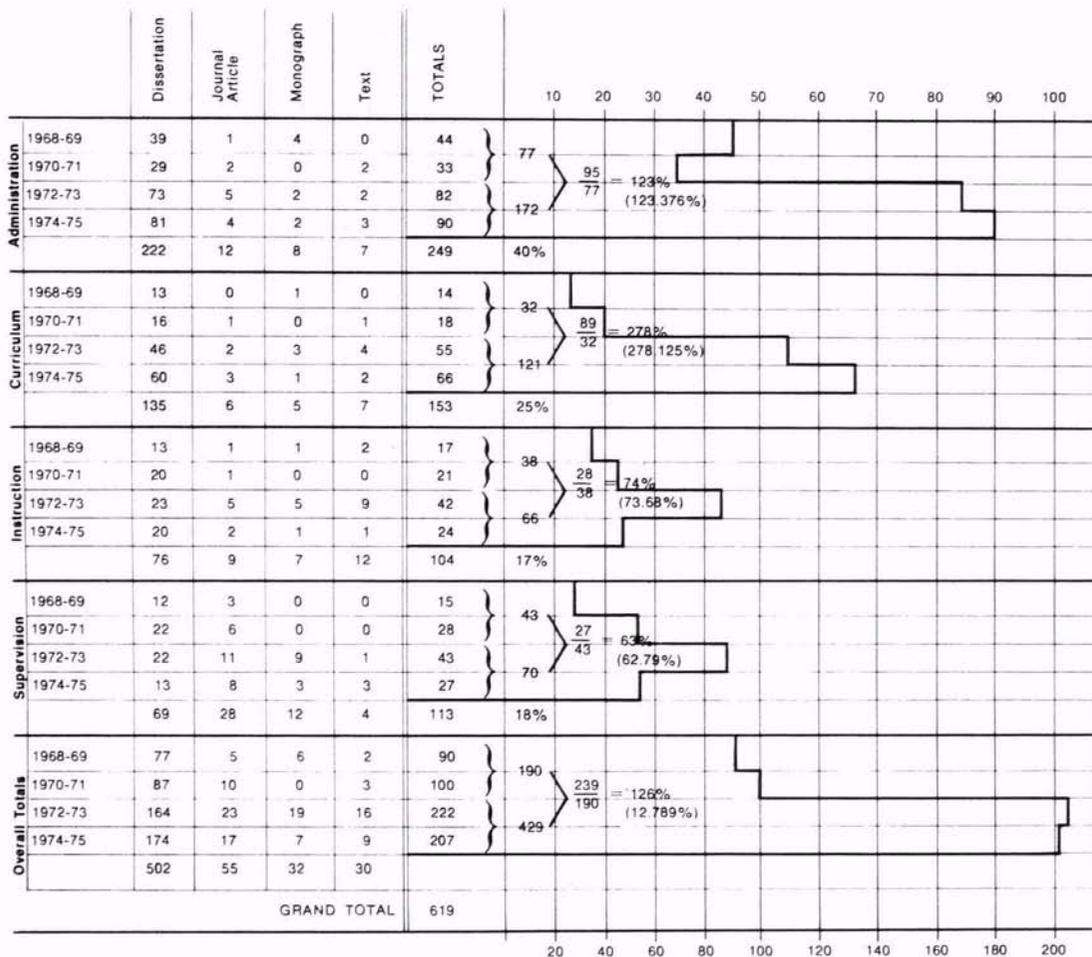


Figure 1. An Examination of Professional Literature Pertaining to Leadership, 1968 to the Present

The latter is described in a 1971 study as "change proneness" and in another the following year as "innovative tendency."

Investigation of leadership through perception of style by the leader and by followers continues, although the number of such studies has been reduced. Only one study, in 1968, focused upon leadership technique. Task and role studies of leaders have appeared much less frequently since 1970.

It is interesting to note that the search for a theory of leadership remains predominantly directed at the individual rather than at the followers or the situations in which

both operate. The attention on organization as an explanation of leadership behavior shifted from structure to climate in 1968-70 but activity in that category since that period has been slight.

It is extremely difficult to separate dissertation research into respective categories of leadership for administration, curriculum, instruction, and supervision. Degree designations often reflect the departmental structure or program organization at a particular institution. Moreover, the title "leadership" is treated as generic and must be interpreted in light of the population participating in a

study. Many of these studies focused primarily upon the elementary and secondary principal. Occasional targets were superintendents, teachers, students, administrators of vocational schools or community colleges, and, since 1972, chairpersons of high school departments. The terms instruction, supervision, and curriculum planning appear in reference to "leadership" only infrequently, with a slight increase since 1971.

The word "behavior" has been utilized throughout the 1968-1975 period, although it would appear that interpretation of meaning has changed. Early studies used it as synonymous with traits while more recent studies consider it as actions within a particular group and/or organizational structure.

Future Implications

Despite a lengthy and varied existence, the field of leadership theory still needs further attention. Certainly the complex mix of individual attributes, group norms, and organizational goals deserves careful analysis.

The evidence is that administration and curriculum have a broad base of research data on leadership. The areas of instruction and supervision lack this identified pattern of research in leadership. The need for an operationally researched behavior system in supervision and instruction appears to be a priority for educational study.

The interrelationships of these areas are evident in the definition of leadership by Alfonso, Firth, and Neville as "behavior that causes individuals to move toward goals they find to be important and that creates in the followers a feeling of well being. . . . By assuming the position of supervisor, one indicates willingness to exert leadership and to be held accountable for affecting the behavior of teachers in such a way that the goals of the organization are achieved. Successful instructional supervisory behavior cannot exist in the absence of effective leadership behavior."¹

¹ Robert J. Alfonso, Gerald R. Firth, and Richard F. Neville. *Instructional Supervision: A Behavior System*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975. p. 45.

There are two significant limitations to much of the research on leadership in education. First, it has focused on the practices of leadership on the questionable premise that what is done corresponds to what should be done. Second, it has attempted to build general theory from specific, isolated, and idiosyncratic studies. A more promising approach, perhaps, is to examine research in fields other than education for theoretical propositions which might then be utilized to generate principles of leadership in education. It is significant that three of the most recent textbooks on supervisory leadership do just that. Two have "behavior" in the title.² A third offers considerable attention to behavior.³

That examination of research efforts in fields beyond professional education has challenged some of the fundamental beliefs regarding leadership. One new view is that effective leadership requires status and power within the organization. Another is that discrepancies will always exist between the perceptions of leadership by subordinates and by superiors. Another, and perhaps even greater departure from established thinking, is that a leader should maintain some degree of psychological distance from his or her subordinates.

Much of what has been learned regarding leadership in education has been derived from studies in which behaviors were controlled by existing circumstances. Research outside of education provides direction for leadership behavior so that hypotheses gained from other fields may be tested in controlled situations to determine their validity and viability in education. Leadership in education can best be investigated by following practice as derived from theory rather than the reverse. Only additional research can unravel the mystery of the pervasive phenomenon called leadership. □

² Ben M. Harris. *Supervisory Behavior in Education*. Second edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975; and Alfonso, Firth, and Neville, *op. cit.*

³ Kimball Wiles and John T. Lovell. *Supervision for Better Schools*. Fourth edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.

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