

Chapter 54

Individual Differences and Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The chapter discusses the relevance of individual differences in personality traits for the study of school leadership, especially with regard to leadership success. Findings from psychological leadership research have shown that, amongst others, personality, cognitive and emotional intelligence, as well as creativity predict leadership outcome variables. The authors investigate how far these traits have been able to predict leadership success across different occupations and also across different situational and methodological conditions. In addition, studies on the relationship of individual trait differences and school principals' effectiveness are discussed. The chapter shows that individual differences research holds potential for educational leadership, but further studies are needed to draw conclusions about the potential cognitive ability, personality traits, emotional intelligence, as well as creativity hold for predicting leadership success of school principals.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leaders make a difference. Same as any other individual's behavior, a leader's behavior is a function of personal traits and situational characteristics (Mischel, 1977). Interestingly, when we look at the school context, we find that there is "little research on leadership antecedents, particularly personal variables [as the research] regarding highly effective principals has primarily focused on effective approaches, functions, and activities rather than on 'the characteristics that enable or increase the likelihood of a person performing those activities' (Boyatzis, 1982, p. 8)" (Williams, 2008, p. 39). This seems especially surprising as the study of personal variables in which people differ from one another is a promising field of psychology, particularly in the domain of leader selection and development.

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This chapter discusses studies which were undertaken in the context of educational leadership by focusing on individual differences at the trait level. At this point it is important to note that traits represent hypothetical, latent dispositions that need to be inferred from observable responses (e.g., behavior; Ajzen, 1987). There is wide agreement that traits are stable across situations as well as across the lifespan, because they are to a large extent rooted in biological differences and can usually only be altered or influenced to a certain degree (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2007). Although there is some debate among researchers what exactly constitutes a trait, there is also some agreement on its definition. In the present chapter we go with Antonakis' (2011) definition that traits "(a) are measureable, (b) vary across individuals, (c) exhibit temporal and situational stability, and (d) predict attitudes, decisions, or behaviors and consequently outcomes" (p. 270).

Commonly, individual traits are divided into cognitive and non-cognitive traits. The most comprehensive and best studied cognitive trait is intelligence, also referred to as cognitive ability. Whereas cognitive ability is usually measured by testing a person's performance on a number of objectively solvable problems (power tests), non-cognitive traits – also termed personality – are referred to subjective tendencies to behave in a specific manner (typical performance tests; see Cronbach, 1949). Regarding cognitive ability there are many different ways of conceptualization. Basically, flat models including a general factor of intelligence can be distinguished from hierarchical models that do not have a general factor. A large number of empirical studies demonstrated the importance of cognitive ability, especially general cognitive ability, for occupational performance (e.g., Judge, Colbert, & Ilies, 2004).

With respect to non-cognitive traits the most extensive recent attention has been directed at the Big Five model of personality that comprises the five broad and higher-order traits Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability. During the last three decades, a large body of literature provided compelling evidence for the robustness of the five factors across different cultures, different instruments, and different rating-perspectives (Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987; Watson, 1989). Both, personality traits and intelligence are of theoretical and practical importance for leadership in general and educational leadership in particular. From a theoretical perspective, intelligence and personality are important because they provide an established and comprehensive frame of reference for the description of an individual's character. From an applied perspective, intelligence and personality are important in so far as they predict future behavior, for instance leadership performance (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Judge et al., 2004).

Within the context of educational leadership "personal variables" (i.e., traits) are underrepresented (Williams, 2008, p. 39). As noted by Hallinger (2008, p. 26) those antecedent variables that were mainly examined with respect to educational leadership were *group* differences (as opposed to *individual* differences) such as principal gender, years of experience as a principal, years of teaching experience prior to becoming a principal, age or ethnicity. The underrepresentation of research on trait differences in educational leadership is slightly puzzling since the trait approach has generally gained immense attention in leadership research and applied leadership settings.

As described in Judge and Long's (2012) comprehensive framework of leadership (see Figure 1), traits are distal antecedents of leadership performance (i.e., leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness). Distal antecedents are believed to affect performance indirectly through their influence on the proximal antecedents described in the model. The distal antecedents that have received the most research attention are cognitive ability and personality (van Iddekinge, Ferris, & Heffner, 2009). In contrast, proximal antecedents of leadership performance refer to situational characteristics that describe the 'where' and 'when' of leadership settings, as well as methodological issues of 'how' certain variables are operationalized.

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