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THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION ON LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Abstract: This study was an exploration of the influence of Christian education on leadership development as perceived by people in leadership positions. A small, purposive sample of 10 individuals who are in some position of leadership and who received a Christian elementary and secondary education were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the influence of Christian education on their leadership development. The responses of the participants revealed four themes relevant to the purpose of the study: integration of Christian worldview, influence of teachers and coaches, academic experience, and activities. This study affirmed the importance of educational experience as a life experience, and supported the applicability of Clinton's Leadership Emergence Theory as a model for evaluating leadership development that occurs in the educational process.

Keywords: *leadership, education, Christian education, relationship, biblical integration*

Introduction

We all have stories of our life experiences, and when we reflect on those experiences we make personal judgments about how those experiences shaped us. For the vast majority of us, education is a normal and expected part of our environmental make-up and is one of the influences in our past that has had an effect on who we are today. Those involved in Christian education assume, or at least hope, they are having a transforming and shaping influence on those with whom they work, teach, and lead. Teachers, administrators, and parents believe Christian education has made and should make a difference in people's lives. Although this belief is widely held, there is still a question about the way in which such an education makes a difference. The intended desire is that students would be influenced in numerous ways, including

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in their leadership development through their Christian education experience. But how does Christian education really bring about change in people, how does it influence their direction, and how does it influence their leadership?

Numerous studies have been done on the influence of religious or faith-based experiences on moral development (Couch, 2004; Davis, 2004; Griffin, 2000; Krispin, 2004; Wilson, 2004). Studies have looked at connections between educational experience, ethical formation, and/or critical thinking (Hoekstra, 2012; Kim & Sax, 2009; Matchett, 2009; Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009). Studies have shown the influence of life experiences on leadership development (Clinton, 1988a; Horn, 2005), the influence of life experiences on the development of school leadership (Williams, 1996), and the influence of educational experiences on leadership development (Bloomer, 1999; Their, 1980). But while there has been an exponential growth in Christian schools since the 1960s (Gangel & Hendricks, 1988), the Christian church has largely accepted the Christian education movement without question, and little study seems to have been done on the influence of Christian K-12 (kindergarten-12th grade) education, let alone the influence of Christian education on leadership.

This study explored the connection between Christian education and leadership development. It is generally assumed that Christian schools are an environment that intentionally works to bring coherence to a student's moral and ethical development, which is a critical component of leadership development. Therefore, it is important to understand how the influence of that educational experience has carried over into the later development of leadership. The purpose of this study, then, was to explore the influence of Christian education on leadership development as perceived by people in leadership positions.

Research Design

This research was conducted using narrative inquiry, which helps us in the realm of education to understand the context, that is, "what teachers and children do in the settings in which they work" (Eisner, 1998, p. 11). We also made use of case study methodology, which "examines a bounded system or a case over time in detail" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 36). This allowed a better understanding of "the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6), because a topic viewed from a qualitative perspective "would not test

theory, set up an experiment, or measure anything," but would rather be interested in trying to understand the experience from the perspective of the participant (p. 6).

As an initial exploration, this study was conducted by "purposively select[ing] those whom we believe will give us the best information as participants" (Patten, 2004, p. 45). As a qualitative case study, it was conducted through the use of in-depth interviews of individuals who are in some position of leadership and who received a Christian elementary and secondary education. The sample included 10 individuals who were interviewed regarding their educational experiences and their perceptions about how those experiences related to their leadership. These were adult leaders who were looking back to identify the effect of their earlier educational experiences.

Conceptual Framework

Clinton's (1989) Leadership Emergence Theory provides a theoretical framework for the study, which conveys the concept that "all of life is used by God to develop the capacity of a leader to influence," (p. 9) including events categorized as internal processes, external processes, and divine processes (Clinton, 1989). A Christian educational experience was viewed as one of those events that could be used to develop leadership because it involves internal (character development), external (people and literature), and divine (Christian foundation) processes.

Clinton's (1989) theory uses a life-history approach, in that it "traces the expansion of leadership capacity in a Christian leader over a lifetime. It assumes that throughout a lifetime a leader continues to learn about leadership" (p. 27). The theory is explained through the use of three variables: time, process, and response. The process variable is "the core variable around which the theory integrates" (p. 29), and is defined as "critical spiritual incidents in the lives of leaders . . . sprinkled densely throughout their lives . . . [that] are often turning points in terms of leadership insights" (p. 29). Exploration of educational background reveals it to be a time when these critical incidents occur.

Leadership Emergence Theory suggests a connection between its components and a person's educational experience. From a broad, introductory perspective, leadership development includes "all of life's processes, not just formal training. Leaders are trained by deliberate training and by experience" (Clinton, 1988b, p. 15). In addition, Phase I is described as the stage in which "God providentially works through family, environment and historical events" (p. 44) and uses "events,

people, and circumstances to develop a leader" (p. 47). The implication can be made that a person's education is one of those experiences that occurs within his environment.

Phase II of the model can be more explicitly connected to the shaping influence of educational experience on leadership development. This stage includes both informal ministry-connected training—such as involvement in a church or other religious organization or institution—and formal training—such as intentional study in a specific institution or training program. A person's education, particularly education in a Christian school, can be applied to both categories. Additionally, all four of the means through which development takes place in this stage—imitation modeling, informal apprenticeships, mentoring, and academic study—can and do occur within an educational context. In fact, it is expected that some of these items are significant components of a teacher's influence on students.

There are also process items that connect Leadership Emergence Theory to education. One of the foundational process items identified in this theory, labeled as a Basic Skills Process Item, is the educational experience. It is also indirectly included as a Social Base Process Item and as a Direct Influence Growth Process Item (Clinton, 1989). Christian education, therefore, can be labeled as a process item that contributes to leadership development within this theory.

The components of this theory can also be applied to the analysis of an individual's educational experience as part of his leadership development. The concepts of patterns, processes, and principles are foundational to analyzing a person's life, and all three of them emerge or become evident in the narrative inquiry process. Patterns emerge through the analysis of the combination of stories, which become the basis for determining specific themes. Various process items—ways and means used by God to develop and move a leader along in the pattern—that occur in each person's life emerge as his or her story is told. A key understanding of this theory is the knowledge that "all leaders can point to critical incidents in their lives" (Clinton, 1988, p. 25) that influenced their development; through the telling of stories, these events become apparent. The theory enables principles to be identified for wide application to leadership and to the development of leadership in others.

Findings

Of the 10 participants interviewed in the study, eight were male and two were female. They represented Christian schools from five different

states and territories—specifically, two different states in the Southeast region, two different states in the Midwest region, and the American Territory of Guam. Six of the participants are in leadership positions in the field of education; two are business owners; one is in a position of leadership in a ministry occupation; and one is in a position of leadership in a medical profession.

The narratives revealed four themes relevant to the purpose of the study: integration of Christian worldview, teachers and coaches, academic experience, and activities, with the first two being the most predominant.

Influence of a Christian Worldview

Unique to the theme of "integration of Christian worldview" was the way in which it appeared to be woven through the other themes. When the participants spoke about spiritual environment, it was incorporated into the context of other things that were part of the educational experience. At times it seemed as if the connection between the integration of Christian worldview and the other themes was unconscious and natural, as if it was an expected and assumed part of everything else, but critically important. There were references to the importance of an integration of a biblical worldview in the academic context, to the example and interaction of faith with and from teachers and coaches, to the discussion and challenge of faith as well as spiritual lessons learned from conflicts and personal challenges, and to the role of spiritually driven activities.

The context and environment of biblical integration provided examples of faith that they could emulate in their teachers, as Christian role models, who demonstrated commitment to following Christ and showing His love. Those same teachers, along with purposeful activities and curriculum, questioned and challenged their students' intellectual understanding of their beliefs, helping them to grow in the knowledge and application of their worldview. The provision of a safe community in which students could question, be challenged, and learn allowed them to develop coherence in their beliefs, resulting in their own commitment to a biblical worldview. They identified this component as something that set their Christian school educational experience apart from other types of education.

Participants in the study made specific connections between this theme and their own leadership development. In particular, they indicated that the establishment of their biblical worldview was excellent

preparation for leadership in that it provided a strong background belief system that developed confidence and strength of leadership. It also helped them to be prepared to respond to ethical dilemmas and to appropriately challenge and question. They believe this environment was important to shaping their character in a way that in turn influenced their character in leadership. The result was the development of authentic leadership in their own lives, leadership that demonstrated integrity in practice and was unshakeable in its core values and beliefs. They also found that much of what they viewed as important to their leadership style was what they had seen and learned by example from their teachers and administrators.

Influence of Teachers and Coaches

Another predominant shaping influence was revealed in the theme of "teachers and coaches." Sometimes the influence of these individuals was intentional and purposeful, and sometimes it was unintentional. It occurred in a variety of ways, whether inside the classroom or outside the classroom, through relationship or through example, through presence or through prayer, or even through confrontation—but all in a relational manner. The teachers would specifically demonstrate compassion, take time to demonstrate personal interest, intentionally seek to shape and influence through personal interactions and challenge, and—as most of the participants described it—they would demonstrate that they cared about the students. The interviewees recalled a variety of examples and experiences, but much of what was remembered was individual attention that was received by a specific individual. Some of the interviewees were also involved in athletics, and categorized their coaches with teachers in the way in which those coaches also had an influence on student lives. In essence, the influence from teachers, coaches, administrators, and any other adult figures in that environment came because of or out of relationship. Much of what was remembered as producing the relational aspect of the influence was the fact that teachers provided individual and personal attention. This important characteristic was repeatedly given as the most influential aspect of their development.

The participants indicated that these relationships and interactions specifically influenced their own leadership practice and theory. They state that they find themselves often imitating what was modeled by these influential individuals, particularly in their relational methods. They point to critical events and experiences that happened with teach-

ers and coaches as turning points, or as specific life lessons. They insist that these things, as well as the care that they received, have shaped the leaders they themselves have become. They affirm that the reflection of this influence on their leadership came because those relationships were meaningful.

The Academic Experience

The participants viewed their "academic experience" as an important piece of their leadership development—this was also indicated as a theme. Although specific subjects or teachers were mentioned, there was not an emphasis on the value of the knowledge component of specific subjects; rather, the emphasis was on the importance of a strong academic program in general. There was also recognition of life-applicable lessons that were learned from specific teachers or in specific subjects. Within the academic experience, the subject area discussed most frequently and with the most passion was Bible. References were made to the importance of Bible knowledge gained, life lessons of Bible application learned, and experiences within the Bible classes themselves. Some of these references included the recognition of the integration of the Bible within and throughout other academic subjects.

The participants believe that a challenging academic experience was important for developing critical thinking skills that are important to leadership. Several also suggested that they learned lessons about leadership from the academic content of courses, particularly through the examples of historical or biblical leaders. However, they placed the highest leadership development value on their Bible classes.

Extra-curricular Activities

The fourth theme that was revealed was "activities." The most obvious component of an education is the academic setting; in the Christian school environment the same is still considered true, but with the added faith-based emphasis. However, the Christian educational experience also includes opportunities for involvement in various other "activities." Interviewees spoke most frequently about athletic and leadership opportunities, but they also spoke of spiritual life activities and other extracurricular activities. Regardless of the type of activity, they spoke highly of the opportunities for growth and development.

The participants remembered a variety of activities that played a practical role in their leadership development. Whether through student leadership positions, athletic leadership, leadership training activities,

or informal opportunities to demonstrate leadership, these activities delivered important growth experiences for their emerging leadership. They believe that often their teachers were intentional about providing these types of leadership development opportunities, even if just in a classroom setting.

Ultimately, each of the interviewees made some connection between their experiences and their leadership development. As they discussed and revealed the emergence of the themes, they would comment on how particular examples and events shaped the manner in which they now lead as an adult. They all indicated that their educational experience mattered, that it was an important component of their growth. As was previously stated, of the four themes that emerged in their narratives, the influence of teacher and coach relationships and the importance of biblical integration throughout the program seemed to be especially significant in their leadership development as it related to their Christian school experience.

Discussion of the Findings

Three areas of discussion arise from the findings of the study: the importance of relationship; the importance of worldview, biblical foundations, and biblical integration in education; and the importance of educational experience and its relationship to Clinton's Leadership Emergence Theory.

The Importance of Relationship

One of the most valuable and predominant findings to emerge was the importance of relationship for leadership and for leadership development. Repeatedly, the participants made reference to connections with people, often intentional, and focused on how those relationships had an influence. They viewed the educational environment as one that provided and facilitated the development of those important relationships. This was indicated by the concentration of memories related to people far more than to classes or other educational components. As several of the interviewees stated, it was the people who made the difference.

Numerous studies have revealed direct and indirect connections between student success and learning and strong teacher/student relationships (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Martin, Marsh, McInerney, Green, & Dowson, 2007; Wentzel, 1998). Others indicate the beneficial effect that mentoring relationships between teachers and students have on teacher

development and student avoidance of at-risk behavior (Fresko & Wertheim, 2001; King, Vidourek, Davis, & McClellan, 2002). Other studies focus on and affirm mentoring relationships as effective in leadership development in many different contexts, including library and information services (Hicks, 2011), secondary school settings (Hean & Tin, 2004), and evangelical Christian colleges (Lund, 2007). A 2008 study by Talley affirms the need for mentoring relationships to cultivate leadership.

A number of leadership theorists have highlighted or indicated the importance of relationship as a characteristic of effective leadership. Margaret Wheatley (1999) includes as one of her leadership principles the focus on building and nurturing relationships that benefit the culture (relationship). Michael Fullan (2001) includes relationships as one of the five factors that leaders must manage in order to lead through change. Kouzes and Posner's (2002) *The Leadership Challenge* described "five practices of exemplary leadership" and their application to leading through change, followed by *Christian Reflections on the Leadership Challenge* (2004), which discussed the biblical principles that were inherent in those five practices. These practices include "model the way" and "encourage the heart," both of which are instrumental in mentoring and relationship building. The principle of modeling reflects the idea that people do what people see, the same conclusion that was reached by Albert Bandura (1969, 1986, 2003) in his studies on behavior modification and observational learning. Seeing the pattern of the importance of relationship appear in the narratives in the study affirms its importance in leadership.

A resource written specifically for Christian schools, *Cultivate* (Myers, 2010), addresses the importance and process of developing relationships that have an influence. This book emphasizes the value of life-on-life mentoring relationships that shape and influence teenagers in Christian schools. The explanation of the process for this mentoring focuses on building a culture of relationship between teachers, administrators, and students in order to facilitate an environment of greatest influence.

The combinations of the various studies, theorists, and experts previously mentioned from leadership, education, and mentoring support the value of relationship for effective leadership and its importance to leadership development. They affirm the importance of components such as building trust, communicating effectively, resolving conflict, impacting perceptions, and effecting change. All of this supports the belief that effective leadership happens best within the context of relationship.

These results indicate the value of schools and administrators intentionally pursuing the fostering of a strong relational environment. This should happen through the training of faculty and staff members in the skills of relationship-building and mentoring, through providing a work and educational environment that encourages and supports relational mentoring, and through training and encouraging employees in the practice of using relational skills for encouraging leadership in students, providing leadership building opportunities, and guiding students in learning from failures and mistakes.

The Importance of Biblical Foundations and Integration

Another valuable finding to emerge from this study was the recognition of the importance of biblical integration to the participants' development. While it might be assumed that this would be an obvious conclusion regarding their spiritual development, it was also true for their leadership development. This facilitation of biblical integration is unique and specific to Christian education.

The importance of faith development and its corresponding moral values is evident in its effect on corporate employment and leadership. A recent study by the Barna Group (2013), titled "Christians on Leadership, Calling and Career," revealed that of all leadership qualities that they value, the most important attribute is integrity, followed by authenticity. In 2005, University of Dallas President Frank Lazarus stated, "What I hear from the business people I'm dealing with is that ethics and corporate responsibility are absolutely at the top of their list when searching for new employees" (quoted in Ziglar, 2009, p. 1). Lazarus also noted that "many employers say the moral and ethical lessons that are taught along with the academic curriculum at faith-based schools better equip graduates to become valued employees" (quoted in Smith, 2007, p. 38).

Leadership theorists have supported the need for ethical leadership. Theorists like Burns (1978) and Greenleaf (1977) initiated a movement that placed an increased emphasis on ethical leadership, an emphasis which in recent years has been followed by others such as Kouzes and Posner's *The Leadership Challenge* (2002). This approach has generated an understanding of the importance of moral and ethical values in leadership. In their research on leadership, Kouzes and Posner (2002) have consistently seen the importance of values, ethics, and integrity in a leader. They report that "in almost every survey we've conducted, honesty has been selected more often than any other leadership characteris-

tic" (p. 27). They add that "honesty is strongly tied to values and ethics. . . . We simply don't trust people who can't or won't tell us their values, ethics, and standards" (pp. 27-28).

Other research has supported the observation that "the perception of leader ethical behavior does affect organizational effectiveness. The perception of leader ethical behavior can be the cornerstone to the effectiveness of any organization's operation" (Kimbrough, 2007, p. 112). Specifically, there is a "positive correlation between leadership ethical behavior and its relationship to organizational effectiveness" (Kimbrough, 2007, abstract). In short, the ethical dimensions of leadership have been widely acknowledged (Greenleaf, 1991; Kimbrough, 2007; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Wren, 1995).

What allows a Christian school to provide a strong foundation of ethical development is its intentional biblical integration that teaches an understanding and application of the Bible to life. It is an environment that provides a framework to understand truth and morality based on biblical truths, is lived in front of students by the example of teachers, and challenges students to be able to know and stand on their faith and beliefs. J. P. Moreland, in *Love Your God With All Your Mind,* makes a strong argument for "Christian people to be taught how to think carefully and deeply about what they believe and why they believe it" (Moreland & Willard, 1997, p. 20). There are some who believe that academic rigor and Scripture should be considered to be mutually exclusive, but the narratives of the participants show strong disagreement; on the contrary, they show that the Christian mind and the Christian worldview do require and reflect strong intellectual capacity and reason, evidenced in the academic strength of their respective programs. It is of critical importance, then, that the Bible is the foundation of theory that is relevant to practice, and that identifying the biblical foundations of theory is an act of reason.

The recognition of the Bible as a legitimate source of truth is reflected in a study by Paul Helseth (2007), which argues that a "commitment to the centrality of Christ and the epistemological priority of Scripture" (p. 383) does not devalue or ignore academic theory and the pursuit of truth; rather, these kind of commitments "inform a kind of aesthetic that is the fountainhead of scholarship that is God-centered and therefore first-rate" (p. 384). In his study, Helseth challenges some of the prevailing assumptions about the nature and quality of scholarship that is self-consciously Christ-centered and Bible-based.

The Christian school environment that the participants experienced

gave evidence of providing both ethical and faith formation, and foundational knowledge of the Bible. While this was provided by teachers as intentional lessons and as part of the curriculum, it was also modeled by teachers, and presented as confrontations and challenges that shaped character. Both the ethical formation and the Bible knowledge were important and influential in the participants' development as individuals and leaders. These results indicate the value of schools and administrators intentionally pursuing strong biblical integration and multiple means of biblical integration throughout their overall program. Bible classes should provide strong content knowledge; in addition, each subject area should pursue obvious connection to and integration of biblical principles and truth. Faculty and staff members should model and teach biblical truths and lessons, and should be given the resources and training to be able to do so.

The Importance of Educational Experience for Leadership Development

The findings of this study affirmed the importance of educational experience as a process and component of leadership development. They also supported the applicability of Leadership Emergence Theory as a model for evaluating leadership development that occurs in the educational process, and for identifying patterns and principles to benefit and/or enhance the effectiveness of Christian education in its purpose of leadership development.

Several studies have addressed the issue of how life experiences influence the development of leadership (Clinton, 1988a; Hannah, 2006; White, 1998; Williams, 1996). According to Leman and Pentak (2004), "each person you meet is a product of their life experiences. Often the key to understanding an individual . . . is to learn something about the person's various experiences" (p. 38).

A number of studies specifically identify the effect of educational experiences (or lack thereof) on the development of leadership, both in classroom experiences and in co-curricular experiences (Altman, 2006; Bloomer, 1999; Escobedo, 1998; Glass, 2012; O'Hearn & Blumer, 2008; Their, 1980; Waage, Paisley, & Gookin, 2012; White, 1998). The concept of Leadership Development Theory proposed by Clinton (1988a, 1988b, 1989) argues that leadership, particularly Christian leadership, develops over the lifetime of an individual as a result of experiences and is explained by the use of three variables (processing—developmental effect of critical spiritual incidents, time—the timeline along which

development is measured, and response—reaction to spiritual processing) as they occur within a timeline of phases (Clinton, 1988a, 1988b, 1989).

The stories of the participants indicated that their Christian school education influenced their leadership formation in a way that is consistent with the Leadership Emergence Theory model by revealing valid patterns, processes, and principles that were part of their experience. Patterns emerged as themes that occurred across the range of experiences, regardless of the individual participants or location of school. Principles relevant to leadership application were identified out of the experiences. Process items such as critical life events were described by all of the participants. The conclusion is that this particular life experience—Christian education—can play an important role in the leadership development process ascribed to Leadership Emergence Theory.

The results of this study, then, supported the applicability of Leadership Emergence Theory as a model for evaluating leadership development that occurs in the educational process and for identifying patterns and principles to benefit and/or enhance the effectiveness of Christian education in its purpose of development of leadership. There are various studies on leadership that make a connection, both indirectly and directly, to the shaping influence of educational experiences. But while Leadership Emergence Theory has been fairly extensively analyzed and applied to leadership development, it has not been specifically applied to the realm of Christian education. Therefore, there would be value in more study on the relationship of Christian education to leadership development, because little research has been published regarding this connection.

This study was initially intended to address the question of the influence of kindergarten through 12th-grade Christian education on the development of leadership. However, through the process of interviewing participants and analyzing data, it was revealed that the participants spoke almost exclusively about their high school experiences. This unintended finding brings to light a connection between biological, social, and emotional development and leadership development, particularly as it relates to pre-adult stages of life, and calls for further research.

Application

It is likely that most Christian school leaders understand the need for a strong academic program, for the teaching of biblical truth, for good teachers who influence students, and for a variety of activities that allow

students to use and develop their abilities. But these components can really only become most effective when they take place in a context of relationship and biblical integration. Therefore, in order to enhance the influence of Christian schools on leadership, leaders of those schools need to understand the value of these two items, and intentionally work to cultivate them within their schools. There ought to be a strong concerted effort to nurture a relational environment. Faculty and staff should be taught effective relational mentoring skills, and school leadership should foster a work environment that allows for and encourages this activity. There ought to also be a conscious plan to integrate Bible knowledge, faith modeling, and a challenge to beliefs throughout the school experience.

While this was an exploratory study, the results make a strong statement on the value of Christian education for leadership and for leadership development. Three truths are evident, which, when combined, emphasize the importance of Christian education. First, the narratives of the participants of this study show that educational experiences have a shaping influence on leadership development. Second, Christian schools provide an educational context that models and teaches ethical and moral values. Third, leadership theories and research indicate that ethical and moral characteristics are important to leadership. The weaving together of these three truths reveals that Christian schools can and do play a vital role in the shaping of Christian leaders, both for our churches and for our nations.

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