

Impact of significant life experiences on special educators education essay



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Researchers claim that much of who we are is fostered during childhood (Caffarella and Olson, 1993). Experiences and early life relationships impact who we become as adults (Cooke, 2004). According to Waring (2003, p. 42), a great deal of past research on leadership theory has “ ignored how the personal histories of people may influence their conceptions of leadership”. Early research has considered methods utilized by behaviorists to ascertain how much genetics impact organizational behavior such as cognition, personality and perspectives of work. This review of research will explore the connection between life experiences and the impact of those life experiences on the professional decisions and behaviors of the special education practitioner and leader.

Problem Statement

The problem statement for this author’s focus of study addresses the topic of prior life experiences and their impact on the decisions and behaviors of special education practitioners and leaders.

Research Questions

The research questions for the author’s study include:

- 1) How do effective special educators describe the impact of significant life experiences upon their development?
- 2) How do these special educators define themselves and their professional behaviors?
- 3) Are there one or two events in special educator’s lives that happen to help shape them into the person they are?

Historical Background

Arvey and Bouchard (1994) and, more recently, Ilies, Arvey, and Bouchard (2006) contributed summaries of research that support the idea that genetics determine work-related behaviors. Arvey, Rotundo, Johnson, Zhang, and McGue (2006) studied male twins to find if genetic factors were linked to leadership role occupancy. Their results showed that 30% of the discord in leadership role behaviors could be accounted for by genetics, and non-shared environmental factors accounted for the other differences.

In order to understand the evolution of research pertaining to leadership development of special educators and how life experiences can impact that development, it is first necessary to look at previous studies regarding the influence of genetics and environmental life experiences on personality and how those personality traits set the stage for behavior.

Throughout the years, researchers have proposed a variety of factors that support leadership development. Some of these factors include intelligence, personality, ethics and genetics. The research supporting genetics as a foundation for future leadership skills is limited. Johnson, Vernon, McCarthy, Molson, Harris and Jang (1998) report the results of a study using 183 monozygotic and 64 dizygotic same-sex twin pairs. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ ; Bass & Avolio, 1991) was completed by the twins. The results showed that 48% and 59% of the variance in the leadership measure was linked to genetic factors. This is very important to research that has looked for a connection between leadership and genetics.

Life Experiences, Leadership Choices and Behaviors

Although the idea that individual difference can predetermine or explain different leadership behaviors, some researchers have looked upon earlier studies questioningly. More recent research has confirmed the link that exists between these variables. For example, research conducted by Judge, Bono, Illies, and Gehrardt (2002) showed that personality variables were “consistently and reliably correlated with leadership variables”. Also, findings from a study by Chan and Drasgow (2001) determined that numerous cognitive and personal behaviors are connected to leadership. Schneider, Paul, White, and Holcombe (1999) showed that personality, involvement in specific activities, and motivation predict leadership abilities among high school students.

Because of the results of studies that link individual differences and leadership, the question of whether leadership is affected by genetics is not unreasonable. Sorcher and Brant (2002) say: “Our experience has led us to believe that much of leadership talent is hardwired in people before they reach their early or mid-twenties” (p. 81). Kallaway (2002) reported on the results of a major United States bank’s commitment to groom their employees (totalling over 95, 000) into high quality leaders. This was done to support their commitment to the philosophy that leadership is influenced by development. There is though, very little scientific research that addresses the nature vs. nurture construct from a genetics perspective. Bass (1990, p. 911) and Arvey and Bouchard (1994, p. 70) propose that such studies would be pertinent. Arvey and Bouchard (1994) suggest that although evidence

may exist linking genetics to leadership, these connections are likely due to other factors such as psychological and physiological impacts.

There has been research conducted pertaining to life experiences and how those experiences can impact a person's drive to lead. McCauley (2001) posits that how a person interprets his prior life experiences contributes to leadership development. Avolio, Rotundo and Walumbwa (2009) carried out an important study in which they investigated how childhood behavior, especially rule breaking behavior, may impact leadership behaviors in later years. The findings of the study demonstrated that there is indeed a connection between early life behaviors and future leadership capacity (Avolio, et al (2009).

Arvey, Zhang, Avolio and Krueger (2007) identified numerous early life experiences that are influential to later behaviors. These include the following:

Educational experiences:

Religious experiences

Parents and siblings or other family members

Experience of loss

Experience of unexpected opportunity

Peer group

Mentor or mentors

Role model who was not a direct acquaintance

Training and development experiences

Prior challenges in jobs

Prior success in leadership roles

Bennis and Thomas (2002) refer to the significant life experiences that shape leaders as “crucibles”. Crucibles, as defined by Bennis and Thomas, are “transformative experiences through which an individual comes to a new or an altered sense of identity”. Others have labeled these significant experiences as “trigger events”, “moments that matter” or “leadership antecedents” (Avolio and Gibbons, 1988; Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Tesser (2002) contends that “early experiences may be more difficult to undo than later experiences; traumatic events may leave a particularly indelible mark on us.”

Toor and Ofori in their research study entitled *Tipping Points that Inspire Leadership: An Exploratory Study of Emergent Project Leaders* (2008) focused on precursors to leadership (or what they called “trigger events”) that impact leadership development. To ascertain the significance of these trigger events, Toor and Ofori conducted their study at National University of Singapore. To collect the data, they utilized a questionnaire that collected information regarding the taxonomies of different precursors to leadership development.

A comparable qualitative study conducted by Marthe (2009) entitled *A Multi-case Study of Primary Circumstances and Life Experiences Contributing to* <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-significant-life-experiences-on-special-educators-education-essay/>

the Careers of Female Presidents in Higher Educational Settings in New England was conducted using a process that included face-to-face interviews with five female college and university presidents in New England. The purpose of the study was to gain information on how life and career experiences impacted the participant's successes and challenges in their roles as leaders. The results of Marthe's study support the premise that experiences have a significant impact on the development of educators in general. Supporting the proposed research question within this review, Marthe's research findings showed that there was indeed a correlation between prior training, professional guidance and personal and professional relationships and leadership experiences.

Toor and Ofori and Marthe have aligned their studies with leadership in a more generic sense (not specific to the special educator). Within this literary review, it is important to gain understanding of the characteristics, practices and perceptions of special education practitioners.

There are many reasons that educators choose special education as a career choice. Some educators may have had early life experiences with a person with a disability, such as a family member or a friend, which motivated them to enter the field.

Of importance to this review is research conducted by Barmby (2006) that studied motivators leading people to pursue a career in education. Based on his study conducted in England and Wales, Barmby found that educators chose to enter the field because of intrinsic and altruistic reasons.

A study by Stephens and Fish (2010) explored the attitudes of special educators regarding their (a) initial pursuit of special education careers, (b) job satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction levels and (c) decisions whether to remain on the special education career path (p. 582).

Qualitative methodology was utilized in this study in the form of audio-recorded semi-structured telephone interviews to obtain the perceptions of special educators. Participants of this study consisted of fifteen educators employed in public school districts throughout the north Texas area. The sample was comprised of eleven special education teachers, three diagnosticians and one former special education teacher currently serving as a high school principal at the time of the interviews. Four of the eleven special educators within this study were previously general education teachers (p. 583).

The interview questions used during this study focused on factors contributing to special educators choosing their careers. The research also focused on factors that would lead the educators to either stay or leave the profession. The following open-ended questions were asked of each of the 15 participants.

1. Discuss why you initially pursued a career in special education.
2. Discuss factors that have contributed to your job satisfaction levels.
3. Discuss factors that have contributed/ will contribute toward you remaining on the special education career path.

The questioning process was conducted through telephone interviews and recorded for accuracy and transcribed by the researchers. Once the researchers had completed and transcribed the interviews, an inductive analysis was conducted. Data were analyzed by the researchers as well as an independent coder.

The results of this study showed that a career in special education was a second career choice for the majority of the participants. Most of the interviewees stated that they pursued a career in special education because of their empathy towards serving students with special needs. One participant noted that “teaching is a calling, not a profession with me. It is a heart call that I answer enthusiastically.” (Stephens and Fish, p. 584).

A special educator who remembered the difficulty of being a student, shared the importance of empathy through placing high expectations on her students (p. 585). Other reasons shared by the interviewees for choosing careers in special education included having a family member or friend with a disability (p. 585), and giving birth to a child with special needs (p. 586).

A significant study conducted by Brownell, Smith, McNellis and Lenk (1995) addressed the main reasons that people decide to become a special educator. The participants of this study included two groups; those educators who chose to remain in the special education field (stayers) and those who had chosen to leave the profession (leavers). Each participant within the two groups provided information regarding their decisions to work in special education. The information, much like the findings in the study by Stephens and Fish, included prior experience with persons having disabilities. Other

reasons included influence of others to teach, and having family members in education (p. 88). Stayers were twice as likely as leavers to mention reasons such as the feeling of having a mission to teach children with disabilities. Leavers gave similar reasons for becoming special educators, yet they did so with less conviction.

Findings published by Crutchfield, in his paper *Who's Teaching our Children with Disabilities* (1997) mirrored those by Brownell, Smith, McNellis and Lenk (1995). Crutchfield found that special educators knew from an early age what they wanted to do and also shared a sense of mission to work with children with special needs. Also, many special education teachers had some significant interaction with a person with a disability as they were growing up- possibly a sibling or a family friend. Whatever their path to this career, Crutchfield found that “ almost all special educators began their career with a desire to help others, by doing something such as working with children, and felt they could have an impact on how children with disabilities learn”(p. 1). Each respondent followed their calling because they had a strong desire to make a positive change in the lives of children with special needs.

The 2007 research paper by Ann Elizabeth Pegg is relevant to this literature review. Pegg's paper, *Learning for School Leadership: Using Concept Mapping to Explore Learning from Everyday Experience* explores concepts of learning used by leaders. But different from the studies by Toor and Ofori and Marthe, Pegg's focus is on learning about leadership through day-to-day workplace experiences. These experiences took place later in life, rather than during early developmental years.

The participants in Pegg's study were school leaders. Pegg utilized a concept mapping process as her research method. Maps were created by the participants and outcome similarities considered.

Pegg's research conducted through the use of the mapping process indicated that learning for leadership from experience was multi-level (p. 1). The study brought forth information that supported the impact of day to day experiences, rather than training and information obtained through literature, as the reasons for leadership development.

Meers (2009) conducted a similar study to those previously mentioned in this review. Meers focused on the impact of significant life events on leadership development, which aligns with the idea that life events can impact the leadership decisions and behaviors of a special education leader. In his study, Meers selected fifteen leaders from varying organizational backgrounds. Each participant communicated specific life experiences and how those experiences impacted their leadership development. Using a systematic qualitative research process, four types of experiences were identified as impacting how leaders develop: (1) experiences of adversity or loss; (2) experiences of "stretch assignments"; (3) inspirational experiences; and (4) experiences with conflict (p. 1).

Meers used an interview process throughout his study in an attempt to find commonalities in the development of the leaders. The questions that Meers focused on were: How are leaders developed? Where do they come from?

The data from the study resulted in the following: (1) The impact of family influences how leaders respond to life experiences; (2) the results of life
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experiences on a person provide tools that can be used during challenging times; (3) significant life experiences can impact the development of leadership; (4) life experiences can support the development of Emotional Intelligence in leaders; (5) reflecting on prior experiences can facilitate leadership development; and (6) pertinent life experiences may result in the development of servant leadership characteristics (Meers, p. 1).

Meers found that the participants in his study had each experienced some type of prior life experience that impacted his/her choices to enter the education profession. Some of the experiences stated as significant were: the death of a sibling, the experience of a critical life threatening illness by the participant, participation in disability rights legislation, the inspiration of a grandparent, becoming a Christian during early adulthood, parental encouragement, growing up a minority, working for an abusive supervisor, a sense of calling (from a spiritual perspective), a drive to make a positive impact on society, a feeling of capability, and early leadership experiences (p. 72).

Avolio (1994) conducted a study in which he examined the development of transformational leadership by researching the link between life experiences and leadership rating. Avolio included a participant population of 182 community leaders comprised of 86 males, 92 females and 4 who did not disclose their gender. The leaders came from both for-profit and not for-profit organizations located in the northeast United States.

The data reported in Avolio's study were based on evaluations of leaders using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) Form 5R and a Life

History Survey derived from the work of Owens and Schoenfeldt and their colleagues. Each target leader completed the 126 question Life History Survey and a standard Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (Form 5R).

The results of Avolio's investigation showed that there were early life experiences that impacted the "self and follower perceptions of transformational leadership" (p. 1576). Based on earlier research studies, Avolio concluded that the associations between early life experiences and transformational leadership perceptions were weak. Avolio determined that those weaknesses were the result of a lack of reliability, more specifically that the respondents, when asked to respond to life history items, may have been responding based on the impact of more current states of development. Avolio found this to be critical to the study and stated that later in life experiences could impact memory and how the individual perceives the life history items. This flaw could indeed result in an inaccurate study.

A 2009 study by Alwin is pertinent to this literature review and supports the results of the previously reviewed studies. Alwin's paper, *The Influence of Life Experiences on Educational Leadership Practice and Evolution of that Practice: An Autoethnography* is a qualitative research dissertation conducted through a longitudinal study that spanned the professional career of the author.

By using autoethnographic methodology, the researcher cast himself as the sole participant. Richardson (1994) refers to this practice-based research as "practical inquiry" (p. 5; as cited by Dirkx, 2006, p. 275). It is a research

approach, Dirx explains, that attends to “ epistemological, moral, and political complexity... [And] that is guided by an overarching aim of giving voice to the particularities of specific practice settings, the insider perspective of practice” (p. 276). One goal of selecting himself as the participant in this study was to generate personal knowledge with which to better understand leadership and practice. The researcher strived to understand and make meaning of the sociopolitical experiences in his leader practitionership. Through his own personal perception, the researcher used his dissertation process as a venue where practice, research, context, and who he believed himself to be, all merged to shape what he did, and, further, became the foundation of knowledge for his evolving practice as an educational leader. It is within this framework that the researcher believed that examination of his practitionership through a narrative of self as participant contributes to further enriching theoretical development of leadership and practice.

As the sole participant, stories told and retold through the researcher’s narrative were uniquely relational to, as well as embedded within the researcher. Because of the nature of the research, the study could be replicated but the outcomes would be as equally individual as the subject/researcher conducting the research.

The main sources of data for all the procedures were:

- (a) 15 – 20 years of personal journals and personal reflections;
- (b) Art and music that have provided a context for the author’s story;

(c) 25 – 30 years of documents from leadership positions including (as reported by Alwin) personal and professional memos, statement briefs, letters, letters to the editor, newspaper articles, correspondences with politicians, mass media correspondences, 10 years of daily schedule calendar/planners, program documents such as brochures, newspaper articles dealing with the author's leadership, videotapes and DVDs of conference presentations at national and state levels, audiotapes and DVDs of news programs the author co-hosted with students and others, lay minister sermons the author had written, workshop presentation materials created by the author, internal and external public survey data results, budget documents, correspondences from future educational leaders with whom the author worked, personal evaluations, photographs of public presentations, events, symbolic artifacts, (e. g. office decor, toys, walking sticks, awards), articles published by the author, legal documents pertaining to personal contracts and negotiations, policy manuals, and weekly Board of Education notes the author wrote.

From the artifacts of the author's leadership over time, he was able to identify themes, traits, actions, values, and characteristics of his leadership and practice as reflected in his collection of artifacts.

The first research question that the author posed was what key life experiences gave shape to how I conceptualized and practiced leadership over time?

To address this research question the author created a narrative life history that addresses his informal and formal learning experiences and

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observations across three decades. In addition to the data sources previously listed, to address this research question he informally discussed these key life experiences with family members. In relating the stories of these personal experiences the author attempted to identify key life experiences that shaped his self-identity as a leader.

The researcher's analysis employed the process of constant comparative. Over time, the data generated were inclusive of dialogues and narratives about a broad range of topics and subject matter related to administrator practitioners in education. The author's analysis of the data included methods that have evolved for analyzing narrative texts. Denzin (1997) identifies these methods and strategies as " semiotic, rhetorical, topological, structural, feminist, content-based, micro level, dramaturgical, thematic, and functional-based models of interpretation" (p. 128). In the process of gathering artifacts the researcher employed ongoing analysis over time while engaging in his practitionership. Alwin's study posits that his life-long experiences indeed impacted and played a significant role in his development as an educator and leader. This study supports other research that similarly links life experiences with professional choices and behaviors.

Alwin's longitudinal exploration of his development as a person and as an educator has value in that there is a plethora of information on human response and the cause/effect process that is a part of living life with purpose and with consciousness. The researcher makes the argument that every action and every inter-action of life impacts that which follows.

Conclusion

Research on the topic of life experiences and how they impact leadership choices and behaviors is limited. Specific studies that address how life experiences impact the leadership choices of special education administrators are nonexistent. The available research focuses on the special education practitioner in general. The common result of the studies in this literature review is that genetics and early and later-in-life experiences do indeed impact the choices and behaviors of leaders. Most of the published, peer reviewed papers utilize a qualitative research method. There is a dearth of scientific, quantitative research studies that substantiate the research topic. It is logical that the impact of life experiences on the leadership choices and behaviors of any professional can be further researched and will contribute significantly to leadership development. The studies reviewed in this paper serve as a solid foundation for this researcher to utilize in further studies.