Self-reflections on the Amount of Superintendent Talk and Impact on Stakeholders from Wyoming Superintendents

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to gain the self-reflections from K-12 superintendents on their amount of oral language/talk to accomplish the work of the superintendency and the engagement of internal and external stakeholders. The focus of this study were superintendents in a rural, Western state. The response rate of the study was 63%. The results of this quantitative study were (a) superintendents talk over 74% of the time to accomplish the work of the superintendency, and (b) when engaging internal and external stakeholders, superintendents preferred working with internal groups versus external ones.

Key Words

superintendent talk; stakeholders; rural; superintendent

Introduction

Forty-eight public school districts operated within the State of Wyoming in 2015-16 (NCES, 2015-16). The majority of Wyoming superintendents work in rural and town remote/distant settings as opposed to suburban or urban settings [95.9% of Wyoming Superintendents work in Rural: Remote/Distant/Fringe (58.4%) plus Town: Remote (37.5%) (NCES, 2015-16)] being more than 45 miles from cities of 50,000 people or more.

Within this context, Wyoming is a state of excellence in education in the Western United States. According to the 2018 Quality Counts rankings, Wyoming is the only state west of the states of Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana with an overall state ranking above C and is ranked seventh nationally ("Quality Counts," 2018). Wyoming superintendents are vital contributors to this statewide success, often working as a "jack of all trades" (Lamkin, 2006, p. 21) in their rural communities.

Rural superintendents play a key leadership role within the community (Jenkins, 2007; Simpson, 2013) and statewide in education (Oakley, Watkins & Sheng, 2017); therefore, it is critical to look at their roles from more than one perspective. Björk, Kowalski, and Browne-Ferrigno (2014) provided five roles for looking at the superintendent in general as teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. Copeland (2013), in exploring the rural, Western superintendent, identified five core superintendent roles as manager, planner, listener, communicator, and community involvement.

Together, these ten roles provide a framework and context for understanding superintendent practice (Kowalski, 2013). Within this practice, Copeland (2013) stated that it was vital for rural superintendents to have "comprehensive communication skills" (p. 9), and Kowalski (2005) stated superintendents could not accomplish the work of the superintendency without using their talk.

Relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006) "focuses on communication as the medium in which all social constructions of leadership are continuously created and changed" (p. 665). Hackman and Johnson (2018) defined leadership as, "human communication that modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs" (p. 11).

Holmes and Parker (2019) using the lens of Motivating Language Theory (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018) determined that superintendents use their superintendent talk in terms of Motivating Language Intensity to positively impact principal outcomes in the form of communication satisfaction, and communication competence and positively impact school and district outcomes through their leader effectiveness.

Therefore, it seems that studying superintendents' talk may help us understand how superintendents accomplish the work of the position. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of superintendents in Wyoming regarding their talk and its relationship to their stakeholders.

This survey research set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the percentage of time Wyoming superintendents spend talking to accomplish the work of the superintendency?

2. What are Wyoming superintendents' perceptions of their level of influence on various stakeholders based upon their superintendent talk?

Literature Review
Superintendent talk
A review of the research on superintendent talk focuses on communication competence (Kowalski, 2005, 2013) best practices (Callan & Levinson, 2011), and motivating language (Holmes & Parker, 2019; Williams, 2017).

The characteristics of communication competence espoused by Kowalski (2013) center around the multidirectional flow of communication, interpersonal exchanges of communication between stakeholders, relational and relation building exchanges of communication between stakeholders, and symmetrical communication exchanges benefiting all the parties involved.

Kowalski, Petersen and Fusarelli (2007, p. 88) go so far as to state, "Professionally and politically, *relational communication* [emphasis added by authors] has become normative for modern organizations." Copeland (2013) noted that if rural superintendents were not competent communicators this would assuredly negatively impact their success.

Examples of areas of emphasis for superintendents regarding best practices in communication include superintendent-board relations, community and stakeholder relations, instructional leadership and staff interactions, administrative and central office leadership, policy and political engagement, and crisis management communications (Callan & Levinson, 2011).

Houston and Eadie (2002) reported 25% of a superintendent's time should be devoted to communication as part of maintaining healthy board-superintendent relations. However, Dan Novey, a longtime superintendent in North Carolina, indicated he spent over 60% of his time on communicating with board members and working to maintain healthy and positive relations (D. Novey, June 25, 2015, personal communication). Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) found effective rural superintendents talked constantly about student achevement.

Motivating Language Theory (Holmes & Parker, 2017, 2018, 2019; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018; Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1995) focuses on the intentional and strategic use of leader oral language [combined with aligned leader actions] to influence and achieve employee and organizational goals and outcomes.

Williams (2017) in a study of the Triangle 5 superintendents in North Carolina found that superintendent motivating language positively influenced principal intent-to-stay (retention). When the Williams (2017) results are combined with Holmes and Parker (2019) results, it is evident that superintendent talk has a positive impact on principals across a variety of outcomes.

There is little in the research of superintendent communications specifically on superintendent talk as a medium for administrative practice (see Lowenhaupt, 2014) or the amount of time superintendents talk as a percentage of work thus the focus of Research Question 1.

Superintendent influence on stakeholders
Superintendents are instrumental in working with stakeholders and are often the "face and voice" of the district. Opfer and Denmark (2001) found that superintendents can influence

and mediate positive relationships between the school community and school boards.

Parent (2009) in discussing superintendent and school board communications stated:

> Knowing your school board members and their individual needs regarding communications is essential to making the whole system work smoothly. For some board members, it is necessary to "overcommunicate." Other board members may want to only know the basics. Understanding board members' individual needs is important way in which superintendents can keep board members in tune with district plans and initiatives and help everyone stay involved. p. 21

Harvey, Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, and Koff (2013) stated as key for superintendents in working with district stakeholders, "you need to talk the local talk" (p. 272). Superintendents work with internal and external stakeholders on a wide variety of issues and topics ranging from board policy and district internal issues (Kowalski, 2013); to labor relations, community engagement, strategic planning, and parent issues (Callen & Levinson, 2011); as well as state and local items of concern and interest to local governments and political actors (Fowler, 2013).

Bagin (2009) held that superintendents who act as "ambassadors" for their districts and engage with local and state political leaders, as well as business leaders, build networks and assist in spreading influence on educational issues. Copeland (2013) stated that rural superintendents must be visible in the community and build releationships with stakeholders. Jenkins (2007) held that rural superintendents are leaders in the community and as such are constantly under the microscope. Given the leadership position of Wyoming education and the position of superintendents as leaders at the local level, it is important to gain additional understanding into their personal insights into working with internal and external stakeholders thus Research Question 2.

Thus, through the collection of data from practicing superintendents, the intent of this study is to gain further insight into the depth of superintendent talk and its relationship upon stakeholders as a select area of emphasis.

Methodology

An online survey was used to answer the research questions in this study. The online survey was constructed from select Motivating Language Toolbox (Holmes & Parker, 2018; Sharbrough, Simmons, & Cantril, 2006) items modified through a review of the literature. The online survey was administered with IRB approval provided by the University of Wyoming to public school superintendents identified by the Wyoming State Department of Education as leading one of the forty-eight school districts within the state.

Participants and setting

Superintendents in each district were contacted via publicly available email accounts and received an email invitation to participate in the study. Forty-seven of the 48 superintendents agreed to participate in the online survey with 30 of superintendents completing the survey leading to a 63% survey response rate.

In order to arrive at the 63% response rate, superintendents were sent one initial contact and three reminders with a financial incentive for participation in the study. The

demographic characteristics of the superintendents who participated in the study are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Superintendent Demographics

Category	N	Percent
Gender		
Males	27	90
Females	3	10
Race		
White	28	93
Native American	1	3
Other	1	3
Age		
Below 36 - 45	6	20
46 - 55	14	47
56 – 65 Plus	10	33
Total Years as Supt.		
Less than 3	5	17
3 - 6	12	40
7 - 10	7	23
11 - 15	3	10
15 - Plus	3	10
Level of Education		
Masters	9	30
Ed. Specialist	13	43
Doctorate	8	27

The average superintendent tenure of the survey respondents was 6.8 years. The superintendents within the sample represented districts from across the state with 15 superintendents leading districts with a student population of 750 students or less (15 out of 22 superintendents at this level [68%]), seven superintendents leading districts with a student population between 751 and 1500 students (7 out of 11 superintendents at this level [64%]), and eight superintendents leading districts with student populations larger than 1501 students (8 out of 15 superintendents at this level [53%]).

Data sources

The survey consisted of 29 items plus relevant demographic items. Twenty-one of the items came from the Motivating Language Best Practices Checklist (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002) modified to fit the vernacular of K-12 superintendents and with the addition of a Likert response scale ranging from 1 (very untrue of me) to 7 (very true of me).

For example, a Meaning-making Language construct question, "Do I tell my workers stories about people who have been successful in the organization" (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002, p. 93) was modified to "I tell my employees stories about people who have been successful in the district." There were no negatively worded items. The data for this study came from eight items resulting from modifications to the Motivating Language Toolbox (Holmes & Parker, 2018; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018; Sharbrough, Simmons, & Cantril, 2006) based upon a review of the literature so that participants could additionally complete the items on a 7- point Likert scale [1 being the lowest] items or as sliding scale items ranging from 0 to 100 percent.

Three open-ended response items used to gather superintendent perceptions of their oral communication strengths, weaknesses, and inferences of what their principals might perceive as receivers of their superintendent talk. The internal consistency of the modified scale, measured using Cronbach's alpha for the scale in this study was .91.

Data analysis

The statistics utilized for this study are limited to a reporting of means to answer each of the research questions. SPSS version 21 was used for the analyses. The means and standard

deviations for the items from the ML Toolbox are reported by research question. Additionally, from three open-ended response items quotes were drawn to support the survey results whenever possible.

Results
The results of this study are reported by research question.

RQ 1—Percentage of time talking
Wyoming superintendents in this study reported using their talk an average of 74% of the time (M=73.6, SD=16.06) on a scale from 0 to 100 as the medium of administrative practice to accomplish the work of the superintendency. This result is consistent with the percentage of time [over 70% of the time] principals' talk during the workday as part of the medium of administrative practice (Gaziel, 1995; Holmes & Parker; 2018; Kmetz & Willower, 1982).

RQ 2—Stakeholder influence
Wyoming superintendents in this study prioritized their influence with district stakeholders on a Likert scale of 1 (not at all influential) to 5 (extremely influential) as school administrators (M=4.5, SD=.5), central office personnel (M=4.5, SD=.57), maintenance and operations personnel (M=4.2, SD=.71), school board members (M=4.1, SD=.68), teachers (M=3.9, SD=.73), community members (M=3.7, SD=.88), parents (M=3.6, SD=.82), and political leaders (M=3.1, SD=1.1).

In discussing positive superintendent talk strengths regarding influencing stakeholders, a Wyoming superintendent stated, "[I am] better at presenting than conversing. Better in meetings than one-on-one." Regarding improvements in superintendent talk, two Wyoming superintendents stated, "[I need] more time to present to more stakeholders," and "I need to continue working

on my knowledge of Wyoming Education Law and district policy, so I can share with others."

These samples of superintendent talk working and desiring to influence stakeholders are examples of leadership as defined by Hackman and Johnson (2018) and are further examples of how superintendent talk can support, guide, and contribute to the achievement of district outcomes consistent with the Motivating Langauge Theory outcome of leadership effectiveness (Holmes & Parker, 2017, 2018, 2019).

Discussion
This study set out to better understand superintendent talk from the reflections and internal perspectives of superintendents in a rural, Western state.

A key result of this study was that Wyoming superintendents spend over 74% of their time communicating orally to accomplish the work of the superintendency, which is on par with the results of seminal principal oral communication studies (Bredeson, 1987; Gaziel, 1995; Kmetz & Willower, 1982) [RQ1]. Restated, superintendent talk is the medium of superintendent administrative practice and is consistent with the Bezzina, Paletta, and Alimehmeti (2017), Holmes & Parker (2018), and Lowenhaupt (2014) declaration that principal talk is the medium of practice for principals.

It is unfathomable to see how a superintendent can accomplish the work of the superintendent position without talking and is now quantifiable with the 74% number possibly being too low as former superintendent Mike Escalante asserted that school superintendents spend over 90% of their time communicating orally (M. Escalante, February 26, 2011, personal communication).

Wyoming superintendents in this study demonstrated a clear preference in working with their administrative teams and internal educational stakeholders over members of the community, parents, and political leaders [RQ2].

This is an additional key insight and consistent with the Oakley, Watkins and Sheng (2017) conclusion that superintendents may struggle with political involvement, particularly those superintendents who have few prior administrative experiences before becoming a superintendent and those superintendents whose background is largely elementary school experience as opposed to high school experience.

Kowalski, Young, and Peterson (2013) reported (a) superintendents with a positive disposition to community interaction participate with the community at higher rates as opposed to those who do not; (b) if a superintendent believes that community involvement translates to higher student achievement, they will engage the community more often; and (c) rural superintendents have higher levels of community involvement than non-rural superintendents.

Finally, Fowler (2013) in discussing educational policy stated, "To a great extent school [and district] administration is achieved through talk: talk in meetings, talk in random hallway encounters, talk on the telephone, talk to the media, and talk on the grapevine" (p. 24). Thus, it is critical for superintendents to be able to understand their stakeholder audiences and overcome their internal levels of resistance in order to maximize their micro-political leadership and achieve their district goals and visions through their use of oral language [talk].

Limitations, Significance of the Study, and Future Research

While the focus of this research are the superintendents of a rural, Western state thus limiting the generalizability of the results to urban settings, the superintendents of this rural, Western state are leaders in the nation serving a state that is in the top-ten on many of the K-12 educational rankings. Additionally, the majority of superintendents serve districts in remote/rural locations as do those in Wyoming; therefore, a great deal can be learned from them and their leadership.

In terms of significance, this study:

- Illuminates the amount of time superintendents orally communicate in order to carry out the position of superintendent (74% of the time);

- Reinforces previous results (Oakley, Watkins, & Sheng; 2017) that superintendents may shy away from political engagement and involvement, thus indicating a need for preservice and in-service development for superintendents to increase their effectiveness as political actors;

- Emphasizes the importance of superintendent talk as part of superintendent preservice education and ongoing in-service development (Holmes & Parker, 2019) addressing the concerns expressed by Kowalski (2013) (a) administrators learn to communicate and talk by practice (often too late), and (b) communication is confined to a managerial context (instead of a multi-faceted and layered contextual competence).

Looking forward, future research should continue to: (a) explore the concepts of superintendent talk as the medium of superintendent administrative practice; (b) further examine the amount of time superintendents spend orally communicating, equivalent study (Gaziel, 1995); and (c) an examination of superintendent talk impact on employee and district stakeholders and outcomes.

Conclusion

Given Copeland's (2013) call for rural superintendents to have comprehensive communication skills this study sheds light on not only on how much time those skills are needed by rural superintendents but additionally reinforces how rural superintendents prefer to engage internal and external stakeholders. Knowing that the medium by which superintendents carry out their roles, practices, beliefs, and actions three-fourths of the time is oral language should drive those who hire, train, and prepare superintendents, as well as superintendents themselves to reflect upon the importance of talk and how to best maximize the power of talk while reducing the assumption that every superintendent knows how to talk and does not need any specialized training, support, or guidance in this most critical of areas. Finally, knowing that superintendents have a preference in working with internal stakeholders as opposed to external ones is a valuable insight for superintendents to reflect upon in terms of policy work, community engagement efforts, and bond management and leadership campaigns.

Author Biography

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