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An analysis of educators' perceptions of the school district in which they teach

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AN ANALYSIS OF EDUCATORS'
PERCEPTIONS OF THE
SCHOOL DISTRICT
IN WHICH THEY TEACH

MASTER'S PROJECT

Submitted to the School of Education
University of Dayton, in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Education

Tiffany Marie Callahan

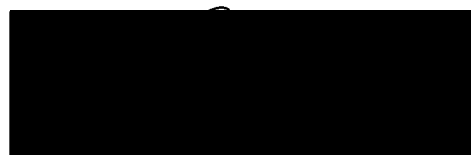
School of Education

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

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Approved by:



Dr. Thomas Lasley

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My husband, Steve, has withstood this stressful journey in the beginning of our marriage and I thank him for his love and flexibility.

I thank my baby-to-be for weathering the storm while I racked my brain writing and rewriting instead of resting or meditating or walking.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose for the Study

Individuals and whole communities often reflect the expectations of others. Those who are perceived as being successful and productive are supported and encouraged to maintain their progress; those who are perceived as failures or hopeless are discouraged and limited, which results in the maintenance of negative behavior and problematic classroom situations. Expectancy theory applies to the behavioral results at both ends of the success spectrum. Do these biases and imbalances in support occur in the realm of schools also? If so, are there differences between the expectancies of educators who live inside and outside of the district in which they teach? Are there differences between educators who do or would send their children to schools in the district in which they teach and those who do or would not?

Teachers' and school administrators' stake in and approach toward the community they serve make a tremendous difference in the overall performance of the students who attend their schools. Is there a way to alleviate the negative perception and biases school personnel have in order to promote more self-esteem and personal success for students?

The writer believes that school communities in which teachers and administrators have a high stake and positive

attitude toward the district in which they teach fare better academically and psychologically. Individuals and groups are more successful when perceived positively by teachers and administrators. The critical question is whether these perceptions are influenced by the location in which the teachers live-- either inside or outside of the school district. In addition, are perceptions toward the district influenced by whether educators do or would send their children to school in the district in which they teach or those who do or would not?

Problem Statement

The intent of this study is to analyze the opinions of educators and school administrators toward the community they serve. More specifically, the researcher will seek to explore the question of whether it makes a difference if educators live inside or outside of the district in which they teach. Additionally, the researcher will seek to explore the question of whether it makes a difference if educators would or would not, or do or do not send their children to school in the district in which they teach.

Hypothesis

The primary hypothesis of the researcher is that there will not be significant differences between the opinions of school personnel who live inside and outside of the district

in which they teach. Further, the researcher hypothesizes that there will not be significant differences between the opinions of school personnel who would or would not, or do or do not send their children to school in the district in which they teach.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire with twelve questions will be distributed to approximately one hundred urban educators. The participants will be asked if they live in the district in which they teach and whether they would or would not, do or do not send their children to school in the district in which they teach. Additionally, they will be asked ten questions about their perceptions of the district in which they teach concerning such matters as safety, aesthetics, and academics. A Likert scale (Isaac and Michael, 1995) will be constructed to assess the attitudes of the respondents.

Assumptions

The writer assumes that the attitudinal questionnaire will measure what it is designed to measure; specifically, the perceptions of educators toward the district in which they teach. The writer also assumes that the participants willingly and honestly answered all items in the questionnaire.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the study is the inability to survey more school personnel. The sample size will be approximately fifty teachers. The findings would be enhanced if a larger number of teachers could be surveyed. Therefore, the findings from this investigation cannot be generalized to other teacher populations. Additionally, questionnaires will be distributed during the second semester of the school year which may result in the reflection of less hopefulness and optimism than during the beginning or end of the school year. Teachers appear to develop more negative attitudes as the school year progresses. The attitudes of the respondents may have been influenced by the time of the year when the data were collected.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

People obtain critical suggestions and pressure from those who are important in their lives. As a consequence, they act in certain ways and make certain decisions (Miller, 1978). Expectations that others project are powerful positive or negative forces in an individual's life (McGinnis, 1990). Educators have a profound effect on many aspects of a student's life in addition to a student's academics, including self-image and self-esteem. Educators influence students' perceptions of their abilities, limitations, and options. If a teacher is encouraging and supportive, then students are more likely to feel confident enough to establish a positive self-concept and pursue goals that are determined by the student's innate desires. The more tolerant and positive educators are, the more successful and fulfilled their students are likely to be. The opposite is also true: the more narrow-minded and negative educators are, the less successful and fulfilled students will be. The limited expectations teachers have about students or an academic community powerfully influence the self-esteem and subsequent productivity of those students or that community.

An important part of the student-teacher relationship is the ability to understand one another and to relate to those who are culturally different. Students and teachers do not have to come from different countries to have

difficulty in relating with one another, but problems of cultural misinterpretation take their toll on students' self-esteem and academics. Simply coming from different neighborhoods with diverse values and communication methods makes a tremendous impact on relations between teachers and students. Jacobs, Kirton, and Trueba (1990) assert:

It is also important to note that the cultural conflict between the teacher's values and the child's needs results in children being prevented from developing a personal bond with their teachers. Other studies suggest that achievement motivation in culturally different children is linked to the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with adults or knowledgeable peers who help children in attacking cognitive tasks which are seemingly decontextualized and meaningless. (p.87)

Believing in oneself and one's capabilities creates greater self-esteem and success, but that belief needs to be fostered and supported by the people in a student's life in order for that feeling to thrive (Dobson, 1974). Low self-esteem can create a lack of confidence and result in failure, which can be the purposeful or careless influence of negative people in one's life (Schuller, 1987). Teachers have contact with students on a consistent basis and teachers' attitudes and behaviors directly impact students. If a teacher praises and encourages a pupil who is having a difficult time with a task, that student will be much more likely to continue trying to understand and respond. If a teacher degrades and embarrasses a student who is having a difficult time with a task, that student will be much more

likely to surrender in defeat. If a teacher has a positive outlook on his/her classroom, the students are much more likely to reflect that care and attention toward others and to exhibit self-respect. If a teacher neglects or allows for emotional abuse within his or her classroom, the students will reflect a negative disposition towards others. If teachers and administrators in a school building enjoy their physical surroundings and facilitate a comradery, students are more likely to be respectful of the facility and of one another. And finally, if teachers and administrators dislike and complain about the school building and their colleagues, the students are more likely to vandalize the facility and create enemies within the student population (Williams, 1984).

One's involvement in the improvement or maintenance of a community or organization is directly related to the level of personal ownership one has in it. The more one is interested and active in defining and implementing goals, the greater the stake one has in the successes and failures of an organization (Dodson, 1974). The more one chooses to participate in events and enjoys interacting with the people in the organization, the more pleasure one gives and receives within that context; the result of this investment is that students encourage further participation and social interaction with peers and teachers. In the best possible school, students and educators would mutually engage in

activities and help to improve that setting and make the experience meaningful and fun. A lack of participation and interaction results in negative associations with schools and poor student academic attitude and performance. Jacob, Kirton, and trueba (1990) note:

Alienation from the social organization of the classroom decreases students' participation in academic activities and students' opportunities to learn, thus leading to a much poorer performance over time. (p.87)

Part of the equation for involvement and success in the academic arena is related to the teachers' or students' sense of belongingness or lack thereof. If a teacher or student feels that he or she makes a difference and adds an important dimension to the organization, he or she is more likely to attend and participate. The star volleyball player, lead actor in the play, or band leader knows his or her value in the school community and is motivated to participate and succeed--each has a sense of belonging and pride. For educators, such personal involvement is also important. The senior class advisor, head football coach, or college counselor know his or her value in the school community--each is motivated to participate and succeed. The consequence is a greater sense of personal belongingness and pride. This motivation for personal involvement extends to parents and their connections with the school community, whether they feel that they are included and effective (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995).

Another element that may effect the participation and perceptions for educators is proximity in terms of where they live in relation to the location of the school is located. The truest test is of the belief in the effectiveness of a school; whether or not one does or is willing to send one's children to the schools in the district in which one teaches. The key question is, does a positive perception of the district come first or is it a result of close proximity and involvement?

Historically, educators have been perceived as having a pivotal role in creating community climate and fostering reform (Bender, 1978). Parent-teacher associations and other groups in which educators are and have been involved have made huge impacts on communities and schools. These efforts are much easier and stronger when one has a personal stake in the outcome, when the events are close to home, and when one knows the other people who are participating. Many factors contribute to a teacher's job satisfaction and output, including perceptions of and stake in the community being served (Huberman, 1993).

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURE

Purpose for the Study

Individuals and whole communities often reflect the expectations of others. Those who are perceived as being successful and productive are supported and encouraged to maintain their progress; those who are perceived as failures or hopeless are discouraged and limited, which results in the maintenance of negative behavior and problematic classroom situations. Expectancy theory applies to the behavioral results at both ends of the success spectrum. Do these biases and imbalances in support occur in the realm of schools also? If so, are there differences between the expectancies of educators who live inside and outside of the district in which they teach? Are there differences between educators who do or would send their children to schools in the district in which they teach and those who do or would not?

Teachers' and school administrators' stake in and approach toward the community they serve make a tremendous difference in the overall performance of the students who attend their schools. Is there a way to alleviate the negative perception and biases school personnel have in order to promote more self-esteem and personal success for students?

The writer believes that school communities in which teachers and administrators have a high stake and positive

attitude toward the district in which they teach fare better academically and psychologically. Individuals and groups are more successful when perceived positively by teahers and administrators, the critical questions is whether these perceptions are' influenced by the location in which the teachers live--either inside or outside the school district. In addition, are perceptions toward the district influenced by whether educators do or would send their children to school in the district in which they teach or those who do or would not?

Subjects

Fifty educators of urban high school students will participate in the study. Approximately half of the educators were female and half were male. All of the educators at one Dayton Public School were given a questionnaire. Approximately 45% of the educators in that building responded to the questionnaire.

Setting

The high school in which the questionnaire was distributed has grades nine through twelve. The school has a total of 110 teachers, three administrators, and four counselors. There are approximately 1600 students. The average expenditure per pupil in 1993 in the school district was \$5,371.

The urban community in which the study was conducted is a midwestern city with a population of approximately 200,000. The average household income in 1990 was \$19,779. The median value of owner-occupied housing in 1990 was \$43,200.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire (see Appendix A) consisted of twelve questions was distributed to 110 urban educators. The instrument was developed by following a review of the extant literature. It consisted of ten questions that would require respondents to rate their perceptions regarding several aspects of the school district in which they teach. Prior to the attitude questions, two questions were asked to establish four background separate categories of educators, based on whether they live inside or outside of the district in which they teach and whether they send their children to school in the district in which they teach. The other ten questions were answered with a Likert scale (Isaac and Michael, 1995) which measured percentage responses for questions reflecting each respondent's perceptions of the school district.

Data Collection Process and Analysis

The questionnaires were distributed in the teachers' school mailboxes in the beginning of February 1996. Questionnaires were collected in the main office in the

middle of February 1996. Basic descriptive statistics were then used to analyze the data.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the opinions of educators toward the community they serve. Expectancy theory applies to the behavioral results at both ends of the success spectrum. Teachers' and school administrators' stake in and approach toward the community they serve make a tremendous difference in the overall performance of the students who attend their schools. Are there differences between the expectancies of educators who live inside and outside of the district in which they teach? Are there differences between educators who do or would send their children to schools in the district in which they teach and those who do or would not? The purpose of this study is to answer these questions.

Process of Investigation

A questionnaire with twelve questions was distributed to 110 urban educators. The instrument was developed by creating questions that would require respondents to rate their perceptions of several aspects of the school district in which they teach. Items on the instrument were developed by the researcher following a systematic review of the available literature. The instrument consisted of two affirmative/negative questions which established four separate categories of educators based on whether they lived

inside or outside of the district in which they taught and on whether they would send their children to school in the district in which they taught. The other ten questions were answered with a Likert-type scale (Isaac and Michael, 1995) which measured percentage responses for questions reflecting the educators' perceptions of the district in which they taught.

Respondents were asked to answer two foundational questions regarding their residential preferences before the 10 perception questions. The responses to the questions created separate categories for the respondents, which subsequently enabled a comparison test (using t tests) of the educators' responses. The first question was: "Do you live in the district in which you teach?". Half of the respondents (52.4%) answered in the affirmative. Fewer than half of the respondents (47.6%) answered the question in the negative. The second question was: "Do you or would you send your children to school in the district in which you teach?". Exactly half of the respondents (50.0%) answered in the affirmative and half (50.0%) answered in the negative. Percentages were determined for all respondents and then each perception percentage was compared (using statistical correlations) to the answers of the first two affirmative/negative questions in order to discover the significance of the responses.

Figure 1

Educators' Perceptions Questionnaire

SA= Strongly Agree
A= Agree
U= Undecided
D= Disagree
SD= Strongly Disagree

1. The school district in which I teach does a good job of educating students.

SA	A	U	D	SD
11.9%(5)	47.6%(20)	21.4%(9)	14.3%(6)	4.8%(2)

2. The school district in which I teach provides a safe atmosphere for students.

SA	A	U	D	SD
4.8%(2)	40.5%(17)	28.6%(12)	19.0%(8)	7.1%(3)

3. The school district for which I teach provides an academically challenging atmosphere for students.

SA	A	U	D	SD
14.3%(6)	40.5%(17)	26.2%(11)	16.7%(7)	2.4%(1)

4. The school district in which I teach provides a creativity-enriching atmosphere for students.

SA	A	U	D	SD
7.1%(3)	35.7%(15)	21.4%(9)	28.6%(12)	7.1%(3)

5. The school district in which I teach provides an emotionally-supportive atmosphere for students.

SA	A	U	D	SD
14.3%(6)	47.6%(20)	14.3%(6)	16.7%(7)	7.1%(3)

6. The school district in which I teach provides a positive aesthetic atmosphere for students.

SA	A	U	D	SD
9.5%(4)	33.3%(14)	19.0%(8)	26.2%(11)	11.9%(5)

7. The school district in which I teach fosters parental interaction in the educational process.

SA	A	U	D	SD
16.7%(7)	33.3%(14)	23.8%(10)	16.7%(7)	9.5%(4)

8. The parents in the district in which I teach are involved in classroom activities.

SA	A	U	D	SD
4.8%(2)	16.7%(7)	4.8%(2)	42.9%(18)	31.0%(13)

- 9 The parents in the district in which I teach are on about the same socioeconomic level as the average educator in that district

SA	A	U	D	SD
0.0%(0)	4.8%(2)	11.9%(5)	40.5%(17)	42.9%(18)

10. It would be appropriate for the majority of students in the district in which I teach to pursue "higher" education after graduating from high school.

SA	A	U	D	SD
14.3%(6)	21.4%(9)	38.1%(16)	14.3%(6)	11.9%(5)

Results

In order to assess whether a significant statistical difference existed between where teachers lived and their perceptions and whether they would send their children to an urban school district and their attitudes, multiple tests were run. The results of the statistical tests suggested some significant statistical correlations. There were significant differences at the .05 level between the responses of participants for six items on the survey. Specifically, a correlation existed between whether educators lived inside or outside of the district in which they teach and for item eight: "The parents in the district in which I teach are involved in classroom activities." The other correlations were for whether or not educators would send their children to school in the district in which they teach and five different items: item one, "The school district in which I teach does a good job of educating students"; item two, "The school district in which I teach provides a safe atmosphere for students"; item three, "The school district in

which I teach provides an academically challenging atmosphere for students"; item four: "The school district in which I teach provides a creativity-enriching atmosphere for students"; and item six, "The school district in which I teach provides a positive aesthetic atmosphere for students."

Discussion

Whether a respondent lived inside or outside of the district in which he or she teaches seemed to make little difference in terms of responding to the attitudinal items on the questionnaire. The critical question was whether respondents would send their children to school in the district in which they teach. One possible contribution to this marked difference is that even if one lives in the district in which one teaches, one may still pursue the option to send one's children to private or parochial schools. Sending one's children to school in the district in which one teaches requires much more commitment and "a stake in" the district on a personal level. As educators, the respondents who send their children to school in the district in which they teach must have a high degree of faith in the system in order to trust it with the important task of facilitating growth in their own offspring. Being close to the source of the educational nurturance, educators can easily see the flaws in their own district and, as educators themselves, they are naturally more critical of others who have similar responsibilities or profession.

Only the responses to one item in the questionnaire were significantly affected by whether or not the educators lived inside or outside of the district in which they teach. This item addressed the perception of parental involvement in the classroom. Perhaps the educators who live in the district have higher opinions of the citizens in that community than those educators who live outside the district. A certain level of community loyalty is reflected by affirming such a positive impression of parental involvement demonstrated by one's neighbors.

The responses that had significant differences between those who would or would not send their children to school in the district in which they teach dealt with five issues, which included such topics as "education," safety, academic challenge, creativity enrichment, and aesthetics. These issues are student-focused and if a parent has a poor perception of a district in terms of such considerations, he or she is likely to choose another educational option for his or her children, regardless of professional loyalties. Therefore, these differences in terms of the questionnaire results are perfectly logical and sound. Some districts require that their educators live in the district in which they work, but that really does not solve the problem of fully committing to the district. If it were possible, requiring educators to send their children to school in the district in which they teach would probably improve

interactions with, perceptions of, and efforts to improve that district.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

Educators' perceptions of the school district in which they teach is only slightly affected by the location of their homes in relation to the location of the school. Only one question on the attitudinal questionnaire created a division between respondents who live inside or outside of the district in which they teach. Compared to respondents who lived outside of the district, those respondents who lived inside of the district more fully agreed that the school district "fosters parental interaction in the educational process" (item seven). Responses to five key perception questions separated the educators who would send their children to schools in the district in which they taught from those who would not. Repsondents who would send their children to schools in the district in which they taught differed significantly from those who would not in responses to issues such as "education" in general, safety, aesthetics, academic challenge, and creativity enrichment. For example, those respondents who would send their children to school in the school district possessed distinctly different attitudes regarding the safety of schools than those not inclined to send their children to those same schools. The research suggests that educators who would not send their children to schools in the district in which they teach must have a concern about these elements of the educational process in that district.

Conclusion

An analysis and comparison of educators' responses and t-test results provided information to suggest that educators' perceptions of the district in which they teach is affected by the location of their home in relation to the location of the school. Therefore, living inside or outside of the district in which they teach does not appear to significantly alter educators' personal stake and involvement in that district.

Choosing to send one's own children to schools in the district did have a profound effect upon the responses to the perception questions. Parents who make the commitment to enroll their own children in school in the district in which they teach appear to have a higher stake and greater personal involvement in the district. According to the results of this questionnaire, choosing to send one's own children to schools in the district in which one teaches improves perceptions of the district in half of all related issues.

Future Research

In order to establish a broader range of responses, it would be beneficial to survey a larger sample of educators. In addition, other demographic questions that might be included for additional comparison related to gender, race/ethnicity, and years of teaching experience. A researcher might want to survey educators at different grade levels and compare their responses; for example, it may be found that elementary school educators have higher

perceptions about their school district than those of middle school educators. Another significant difference might be indicated if the respondents were asked to specify whether they have sent their children to schools in the district in which they teach or if they plan to send their own children to those schools in the future.

Another section could be added to the survey to inquire about specific areas such as whether educator involvement influences their rapport with students, rapport with colleagues, or their participation in extracurricular events. These questions would allow the researcher to obtain a more direct view of the educators' involvement and participation in the school in which they teach.

Implications

Some school districts require that educators who teach in the schools must live in the same district. There are certainly several reasons for this requirement, one of which is related to the perception that increased proximity will also increase this teacher's personal stake and participation in the school district in which he or she teaches. The results from this study indicate otherwise; living inside or outside of the district in which one teaches seems to make little difference in the educators' perceptions of the schools. What may be much more effective but difficult to enforce but would be that all educators in a district send their children to schools in that district.

When addressing educators and their students, the question eventually becomes which should be the priority: an educator's personal life and family or his or her professional commitment to the school district in which they teach and its students? This question can ultimately only be answered by educators themselves. School districts can only impose a limited number of personal requirements for educators, even in the best interest of students. It is the responsibility of educators to maintain a high level of interest, involvement and personal stake in the school district in which they teach.

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APPENDIX I

Dear Educators:

I am doing my Masters project at the University of Dayton this term and request that you complete this questionnaire and return it to your main office by February 15, 1996. Thank you very much for your cooperation, time, and input. I will provide you with a summary of my findings when they become available, later this spring. PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ON THIS PAPER.

SA= Strongly Agree

A= Agree

U= Undecided

D= Disagree

SD= Strongly Disagree

Do you live in the school district in which you teach?

YES NO

Do you or would you send your children to school in the district in which you teach?

YES NO

1. The school district in which I teach does a good job of educating students.

SA A U D SD

2. The school district in which I teach provides a safe atmosphere for students.

SA A U D SD

3. The school district in which I teach provides an academically challenging atmosphere for students.

SA A U D SD

4. The school district in which I teach provides a creativity-enriching atmosphere for students.

SA A U D SD

5. The school district in which I teach provides an emotionally-supportive atmosphere for students.

SA A U D SD

6. The school district in which I teach provides a positive aesthetic atmosphere for students.

SA A U D SD

7. The school district in which I teach fosters parental interaction in the educational process.

SA A U D SD

8. The parents in the district in which I teach are involved in classroom activities.

SA A U D SD

9. The parents in the district in which I teach are on about the same socioeconomic level as the average educator in that district.

SA A U D SD

10. It would be appropriate for the majority of students in the district in which I teach to pursue "higher" education after graduating from high school.

SA A U D SD

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