Understanding superintendent decision-making: Results of an analysis of leader theorizing in a high performing school district

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research study investigating one school superintendent's Personal Practical Theories (PPTs) and perceptions with regard to his leadership theories and practices among leaders within his district. A resultant naturalistic leadership model depicts the interaction of contingency leadership and servant leadership constructs in his theorizing.

Personal Practical Theories (PPTs) as a theoretical concept originated from qualitative case study research of teacher thinking and decision-making (e.g., Cornett, 1990a). The researchers posit that teachers and leaders are guided by deep dispositional constructs that are implicit, but can be inferred from observation and made explicit through action research interview processes (e.g., Cornett, 1990b). These dispositional constructs are based on a lifetime of experiences outside the professional role as an educator (Personal) as well as the formal role(s) (Practical). These constructs are so grounded that they become the systematic basis for that individual's decision-making (Theories).

While there is some scholarship that connects this research to pre-service administrator decision-making and related leadership PPTs (e.g., Daresh, 1992), there are no extant studies investigating the complexity of superintendent decision-making using this process. This paper reports preliminary results from a completed multi-year research project that addressed the question of *what is guiding the decision-making of the superintendent of a successful school district?* The superintendent completed an action research process (guided by the researchers) that made his Personal Practical Theories (PPTs) of leadership explicit, and then analyzed how those PPTs were present in guiding his decision-making. As a result, he now explicitly communicates those PPTs to school and district leaders, board members, and other stakeholders as a part of his visioning for the district. In addition to multiple observations and interviews involving the superintendent in actual leadership interactions, interviews were conducted with more than thirty elementary, middle, high school and district-level leaders with the intended purpose of identifying the extent to which the superintendent's PPTs aligned with (1) the respondents' perceptions of the superintendent's leadership; and, (2) the respondents' perceptions of their own leadership approaches. Results are presented along with an agenda for further work with the rich data set collected via the interviews. The findings will provide stakeholders in educational leadership programs with a new model of naturalistic decision-making and a method for generating action research studies of other pre-service and in-service leaders.

The purpose of this paper is to present findings from a research study that investigated the theorizing and related decision-making of a highly experienced superintendent and district and school-based leaders' perceptions with regard to his leadership theories and practices. The superintendent, Joseph Joyner, is currently beginning his 38th year as an educator. He has been a teacher and coach, and his various administrative positions have included principal, area superintendent (Orange County Public Schools), and superintendent of St. Johns County School District (SJCSD) since 2003.[i]

The researchers began their collaboration with Joyner on the current study in 2012 when Johnson joined the faculty at the University of North Florida. In 2013-2014, they conducted interviews with the superintendent, district administrators, and school-based administrators.

St. Johns County School District (SJCSD) is a mid-sized district in the State of Florida with approximately 35,000 students and 4,000 employees. There are eighteen elementary schools, three K-8 schools, seven middle schools, and 7 high schools along with an alternative center, six charters, three juvenile justice facilities, and one virtual school. Of the sixty-seven districts in the third most populous state in the United States,[1] SJCSD is ranked at or near the top in most measures of student achievement. Following are some examples of high levels of academic performance from the 2014 school year:

- first in the state in total Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) points for the past six years;

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[1] There are approximately 220,000 residents in St. Johns County. Of these approximately 85% are white, 5.8% Hispanic, 5.7% African American, and 2.5% Asian. Foreign-born account for more than 6% and 8% speak a language in the home other than English. There are 9.6 % of the population below the poverty line. http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/12109.html. The student population is as follows: 87.1 & White, 7.5% African American or Black, 3.7 % Asian, 0.2% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.2% Native American or Alaskan, and 1.4 & Multi-racial with 7.8 % identified as Hispanic under the Ethnicity category. http://www.stjohns.k12.fl.us/about/.

- one of five districts to earn an "A" grade for ten consecutive years;

- first in 2014 FCAT 2.0 reading grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10;

- first in 2014 FCAT 2.0 math in grades 3, 5, and 7;

- first in Florida in science in grades 5 and 8;

- first in student performance in End-Of-Course (EOC) examinations in biology 1, civics, geometry, and U.S. history; and,

- second in the state on the EOC in algebra 1.

The district has a deep commitment to career-oriented academies (n = 17) that are housed within the high schools. They are focused on diverse themes such as: aerospace; arts; coastal and water resources; culinary arts; environmental and urban planning; teaching; and, international business and finance. In addition, the district advances character education as evidenced by multiple emphases on *Character Counts!* curricula and on elements of citizenship, responsibility, fairness, caring, trustworthiness, and respect.[2]

SJCSD has embraced professional development as part of the core mission of the district. Evidence of that commitment is the creation of a *Professional Development System Plan, 2013-2018*. The approximately 80 page document begins with the following: "Within each school and department, SJCSD will develop leadership and build capacity to design, deliver and support high quality professional development which enhances the knowledge, skills, dispositions and practices of employees to ensure that all students perform and achieve at the highest levels" (SJCSD, 2015).

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[2] http://www.stjohns.k12.fl.us/cc/

A focus on hiring the best talent and "coaching it up" has been consistently part of the vision of the superintendent. That emphasis was evident as part of Joyner's theorizing as revealed by his PPTs and through his own involvement in action research designed to identify his core PPTs, their congruence with his practice, and his own continual professional development. Personal Practical Theories or PPTs (Cornett, 1990a) developed as a construct based upon a variety of influences from the literature including reflective practice (e.g., Dewey, 1933; Schon. 1983; Zeichner, 1987) and teacher thinking and decision-making (e.g., Clark & Peterson, 1986; Elbaz, 1983). PPTs are those deep beliefs that all practitioners, including school and district administrators, possesss that enable them to act in complex situations (Reitzug & Cornett, 1990). They are *Personal* in that they are rooted in the autobiography of the leader based upon experiences outside of the role of administrator (schooling teaching, home life, etc.). They are *Practical* in that they are based on the experiences of that leader "on the job." They are *Theories* in that they are systematic and identifiable by trained observers (Cornett, 1990b) and through the participant's own action research (Cornett, Yeotis, & Terwilliger, 1990; Cornett & Hill, 1992).

Joyner identified his Personal Practical Theories (see Table 1) in a previous study developed around two action research projects in the district focused on administrator decision-making, the first led by Cornett[3] and the second led by Cornett, Joyner, and Reeves. Twenty-three district or school-based administrators took part in those workshops that taught participants to identify their 4-7 core beliefs of leadership. During both workshops, Joyner shared his PPTs (see Table 1) and stressed that those beliefs were developed over the course of his lifetime, and each participant should identify their unique ones as well. Joyner's PPTs are as follows:

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[3] Jennifer Reeves, a former area superintendent in Orange County Public Schools (OCPS) (Florida) and previously a staff member for Joyner, indicated that the PPTs Joyner identified were, in her view, operational during his time at OCPS. She also assisted in the two workshops on administrator theorizing and an unpublished manuscript (2011), Cornett, Joyner, Reeves, and Chant.

Table 1: Superintendent's Personal Practical Theories

| PPT	Description/Clarification
PPT 1 *It's All About Students*	*"It's All About Students"* is the foundation of all the superintendent's decision making. He continually asks himself as he plans, acts, and reflects about his decisions, "Will this positively impact students?" This is the most important conceptual filter for his work.
PPT 2 *Teachers Are Key* *Three Legged Stool*	*"Teachers are the Key"* is evidence of his passion for recruiting the best teachers and providing the appropriate resources for their ongoing development. The Three Legged Stool is "hire the best, coach them up, and if they are not performing coach them out."
PPT 3 *Servant Leader Attributes*	*Servant Leadership, is indicative of the importance he places on making decisions following principles he has adapted from or situated in the work of Greenleaf (see Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1998) that includes ten characteristics such as listening, empathy, conceptualization, and stewardship. This PPT is foundational and non-negotiable.*
PPT 4 *Situational/Contingency* *Leadership*	*"Situational/Contingency Leadership"* is his recognition that context helps to determine the requisite leadership thought and action, and a reasoned variance and eclecticism in approach is warranted. The formal labeling of this PPT came during his graduate work, and directly from the scholarship of Hersey and Blanchard (1969).
PPT 5 *Relational-Orientation* *Attributes*	*"Relational-Orientation Attributes"* illustrates his emphasis on people, building trust and rapport, and concern and care for his constituents.
PPT 6 *Task-Orientation Attributes*	*"Task-Orientation Attributes"* depicts his commitment to thoughtful preparation, distribution of tasks to the right individuals within the organization, and for accountability for himself as well as members of his

	leadership team. These task attributes are channeled towards a highly focused vision that has been adopted by the school board, and is currently incorporated in the new strategic plan.

Note. The list is not in rank order of importance to the superintendent. In addition, they often are operational in combinations and sometimes all undergirding leader actions.

Joyner's six core PPTs were illustrated in a graphic that represented the interaction of these beliefs between and among each other as they guided his decision-making (see Figure 1). Cornett tested his Naturalistic Model of Teacher Decision-Making in his interactions with Joyner and participants in the action research workshops and both the researcher and the participants indicated that it also had heuristic value for leaders (see Figure 2). At the center of the model (see Figure 2, [A]), the superintendent has a core of six personal, practical theories (PPTs) that guide his decision-making as he interacts with principals, central district personnel, board members, or other district stakeholders. These PPTs guide his practice and, depending upon the situation at hand, some PPTs might be more apparent than others. Ideally, PPT1 ("It's All About Students") is the bedrock for all decision-making.

The superintendent began in his role in this school district (2003) with a general conception (B) of what it means to be a superintendent based upon his prior experience including serving as an area superintendent of a large district (approximately 160,000 students), as a principal, a teacher, and as a coach. This perception is influenced by information gathered through interactions with the school board, employees, community members, and students. This notion of the superintendency is filtered through the core beliefs (PPTs) about leadership and the role of the superintendent.

Figure 1: Superintendent's Personal Practical Theories Graphic[4]
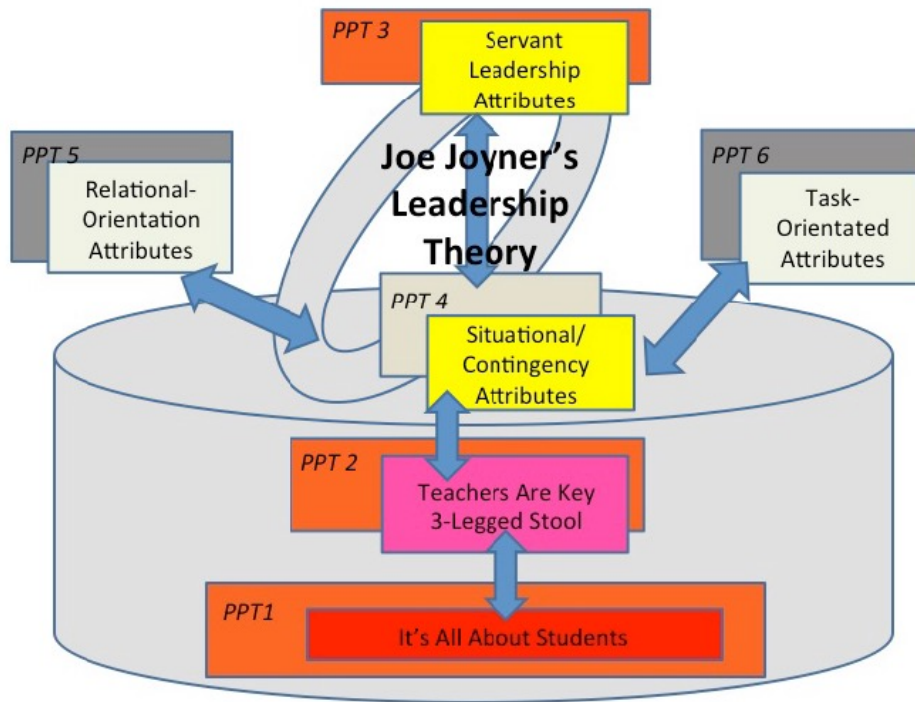
As the superintendent plans (C) for interaction with various stakeholders, that planning is influenced by his PPTs that guide his deliberations about how he will facilitate the interactive phase. This planning may be prolonged such as the preparation for a board meeting or a "State of the District" presentation to the community. Or it may be during the few seconds of walking down a hallway to a meeting with a parent that has shown up without an appointment.

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[4] The original draft model of his PPTs was first developed by Cornett in collaboration with a member of the initial research team, Richard Chant, in 2010. As part of a participant confirmation interview in 2010, Joyner acknowledged that this graphic was representative of his core PPTs. It was confirmed by Reeves in 2010-2011, as well as various SJCSD personnel. Joyner indicated in an interview in 2013 that it was still appropriate as a representation of those PPTs, and he utilized it in a district-wide meeting in discussing his vision for the district.

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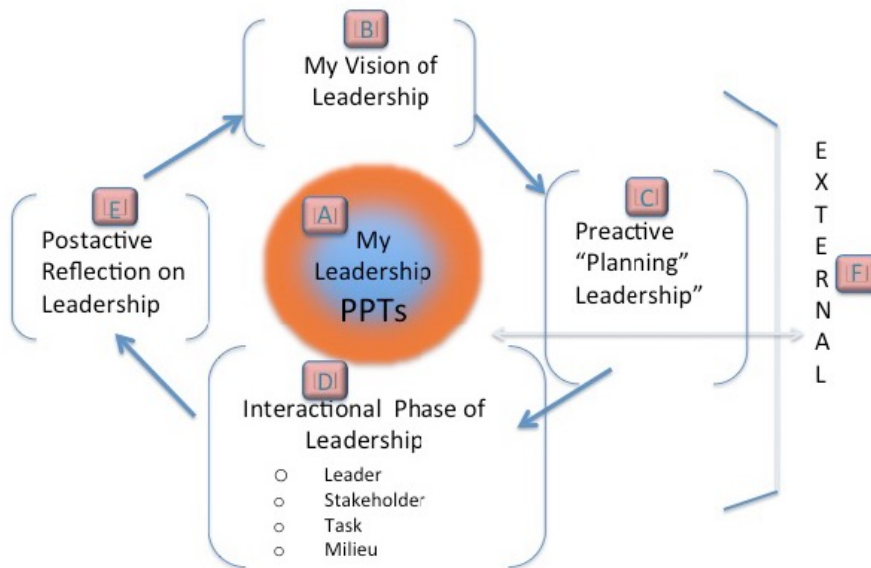**Deleted:** n

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Figure 2: A Naturalistic Model of Leader Decision-Making (adapted from Cornett, 1990b)

Naturalistic Leadership Decision-Making Model

The Interactional Phase (D) is where a meeting occurs and the superintendent is the facilitator or a participant. It may involve an interaction with one person or hundreds at a town hall meeting (stakeholders). Other constructs in this phase include leader, task, and milieu (or climate in the meeting). When the interaction ends, there is a period of Reflection (E) where the leader thinks about what took place. This often is guided by the questions such as, "How did that work?" "What took place and how did the participant(s) feel?", "How did I do?" The elements from the interactional phase that are considered during reflection are guided by the PPTs and tacit assumptions about the effectiveness of these PPTs in the particular situation.

This phase then continues on to a revised image of the overall conception of the superintendency.

Joyner and the participants in the action research workshops indicated that the model helped them understand the complexity of their leadership, the multiple decisions made in both short and long term contexts, and the centrality of their PPTs in their decisions. It also gave them a view of the influence of professional development, graduate coursework, and professional readings and the impact of this on their PPTs and their overall practice.

Servant Leadership

An outcome of the action research projects originally conducted prior to the current study is to help participants understand the range of what we refer to as *formal theory*, both scholarly articles and actual research studies. The purpose is to help participants understand that once they identify their PPTs, they may identify issues of congruence and incongruence between and among their PPTs, their overall theorizing about a particular aspect of their practice, and the support or conflict with their thinking and action that is evident in this literature. This scholarship should help them further process the concepts and aid in their deeper deliberation about their own theorizing.

As part of this support of professional development around reflective practice, Cornett prepared a white paper that contained a summary for Joyner of scholarship related to the construct of servant leadership, PPT 3. Joyner had originally read work by Greenleaf (1977) and several others.

Cornett verified with Joyner that Greenleaf (1977, 2005) and Spears (1998) were significant original influences on his thinking and that Spears' list of ten characteristics of servant leaders that built upon Greenleaf's work was in fact the part of the foundation of Joyner's

theoretical preparation in the concept. Spears (1998) identifies those ten as follows: *(1)*
Listening, (2) Empathy, (3) Healing, (4) Awareness, (5) Persuasion, (6) Conceptualization, (7)
Foresight, (8) Stewardship, (9) Commitment to growth of people, and (10) Building community
(pp. 5-8). Cornett indicated to Joyner that there was some actual research related to servant
leadership that went beyond the discussion of the construct. Some of it analyzed various models
looking for patterns. For example, Van Dierendonck (2011) submits that across servant leader
models, both multi-dimensional and one-dimensional measures, there are 44 variables that exist
across the models, with six emerging as similar across this range: *(1) Empowering and*
developing people, (2) Humility, (3) Authenticity, (4) Interpersonal acceptance, (5) Providing
direction, and (6) Stewardship.

Multiple dissertations have focused on servant leadership in a variety of fields
representing quite diverse areas such as theology, business, and higher education and K-12
education (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Bugenhagen, 2006; Cunningham, 2008; Drury, 2004; Williams,
2009). Of those investigating servant leadership within the field of education, the findings are
limited by a combination of factors, including: a lack of ongoing observation and interviews with
and about the leader in action; an over-reliance on respondent self-ratings absent action data; a
lack of emphasis on helping the leader become more reflective in connecting beliefs and actions;
a lack of attempt to tie individual and group staff development to any of this work. [ii]

As Joyner presented workshops for various organizations on leadership, he added five
more elements that he felt were part of the construct in his version of servant leadership:
honesty/integrity; humility; loyalty; persistence; and, passion (see Figure 3). These additions are
in green in the bottom row, and he views them as bedrock for the other elements. Joyner actively
sought knowledge of additional scholarship and research related to servant leadership to both

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strengthen and challenge his theorizing. He also discussed the label of "skills" and considered Cornett's assertion that these fifteen elements were linked more deeply to his decision-making than the term skill would suggest. Cornett recommended that Joyner consider them to be "Essential Dispositions" (see Figure 4). his ongoing commitment to strengthening his understanding of his own decision-making by participating in action research and ongoing scholarship resulted in the focus of the current study.

Figure 3: Superintendent's Original Chart of Servant Leadership Skills (adapted from Spears, 1992)

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Listening

Empathy   Healing

Awareness   Persuasion   Conceptualization

Foresight   Stewardship   Growth of People   Building Community

Honesty/Integrity   Humility   Loyalty   Persistence   Passion

ESSENTIAL SKILLS

Methodology

This year five component of the long term case study of superintendent decision-making was built upon qualitative research methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) utilized to develop grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

This study involved addressing the following main question in the interviews with respondents on site: *What do school district leaders view as their superintendent's guiding principles and related decision-making and what are the implications of that theorizing for them and the district?* There were twenty-seven guiding questions, of which four were the primary sub-questions:

1. *What do you believe are the key (most important) elements of the superintendent's leadership?*

2. *Looking at the model of his leadership Personal Practical Theories (PPTs), what strikes you? Does this accurately reflect him? Do you see congruence among his beliefs and practice?*

3. *What does it mean to be a servant leader?*

4. *How would you rate the superintendent on the scale 1-10 on each of the fifteen servant leader dispositions? Yourself? (use two artifacts, one for him and one for you) What are his top four servant leader dispositions in your view?*

The researchers met with Joyner to discuss the possibility of this research (including sharing the interview guide) at the beginning of the school year. Both Cornett and Johnson attended multiple meetings in the district, conducted a final interview with Joyner to check his own analysis of the servant leadership element of his theorizing, and then shared the preliminary findings (anonymously) with him from the majority of the interviews to ascertain Joyner's thoughts about the findings.

A total of thirty-three employees were interviewed at their respective school or district offices. Most interviews lasted approximately one hour. All respondents were promised anonymity, and were told that if any of their comments were to be attributed to them directly their permission would be obtained prior to utilization. [5] Of these participants, approximately fifty percent were participants in one of the action research workshops, and as a result had their own notion of their PPTs, previous detailed knowledge of Joyner's theorizing that he shared in those workshops, and also had trust in the research process. Only four of the participants had no prior interactions with the researchers, and as a result it was more complicated to build that relationship so that the researchers had less confidence in the truth value of the findings with those respondents.

Findings

Participants were asked the guiding questions and initially asked the question about Joyner's leadership without viewing the graphics. Those who had been exposed to his PPTs and related graphic previously (18) were able to identify his core PPTs. Those that had a memory of seeing it, but were less familiar, nevertheless indicated that they understood the graphic and all 33 participants stated that his PPTs were evident in his practice. A few had not had the opportunity to witness elements of servant leadership, due to their limited exposure to him in one-to-one contexts (these are evidenced by those that inserted NR for Not Rated in the Servant Leadership chart).

Shortly into the interview process, each school site respondent (principals and assistant principals, n= 23) was given a copy of the Servant Leadership chart and asked to rate Joyner in

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[5] This promise of anonymity included paraphrases that might be recognized by the superintendent due to information that might only be linked to the respondent through the nature of the paraphrase of related demographics (e.g., only one executive director of curriculum, one associate superintendent of human resources).

the fifteen elements on a scale of one to ten, with ten the highest and multiple uses of the same rating permitted (three of the respondents gave him all tens). They were then asked to rate themselves on another copy of the chart (see Table 2 for results). The Site-Based Administrators rated Joyner higher (mean scores) on all fifteen dispositions then they rated themselves. They rated Joyner highest in the following: honesty/integrity; passion; loyalty; stewardship; and persistence. They rated themselves highest in the following: honesty/integrity; loyalty; passion; persistence; and stewardship.

Table 2. Administrators' Ratings of the Superintendent and Self-Ratings

Servant Leader Dispositions	Rating of Superintendent by Administrators (mean)	Administrators' Self-Rating (mean)
Honesty/integrity	9.87	9.62
Passion	9.82	9.23
Loyalty	9.73	9.62
Persistence	9.52	9.14
Foresight	9.43	7.62
Persuasion	9.18	7.1
Building Community	9.14	7.67
Conceptualization	9.14	7.9
Growth of People	9.09	7.95
Healing	9	7.16
Empathy	8.95	7.38
Awareness	8.9	8

Particularly salient, in the researchers' view, when the respondents were asked to identify the top four servant leadership dispositions (see Figure 4) exhibited by their superintendent, all 33 participants indicated that this was a difficult task since the superintendent exhibited most or all of the traits in the highest possible positive manner. The respondents rated the top four as honesty/integrity; passion; foresight and humility (tie). The principals and assistant principals (n = 23) were also asked to rate Joyner's top disposition (see numbers in the right side of the boxes in Figure 4) with the following results: honesty/integrity (9 respondents rating this as his top disposition); passion (3) and listening (3) (tie); humility (2); growth of people (1); and, empathy

(1). One refused, indicating they were all 10s and worked holistically, so he would not attempt to isolate one as "best."

Figure 4: Respondents' and Superintendent's Perceptions of Superintendent's Servant Leadership Dispositions

Joe Joyner's
Servant Leadership Essential Dispositions
(Cornett and Johnson, 2013)

Respondents N =33

		Listening 10 3	

Empathy 2 1 | **Healing** 0

Awareness 6 | **Persuasion** 2 | **Conceptualization** 2

Foresight 13 1 | **Stewardship** 10 3 | **Growth of People** 7 1 | **Building Community** 4

Honesty/ Integrity 25 13 | **Humility** 13 3 | **Loyalty** 9 | **Persistence** 4 | **Passion** 21 5
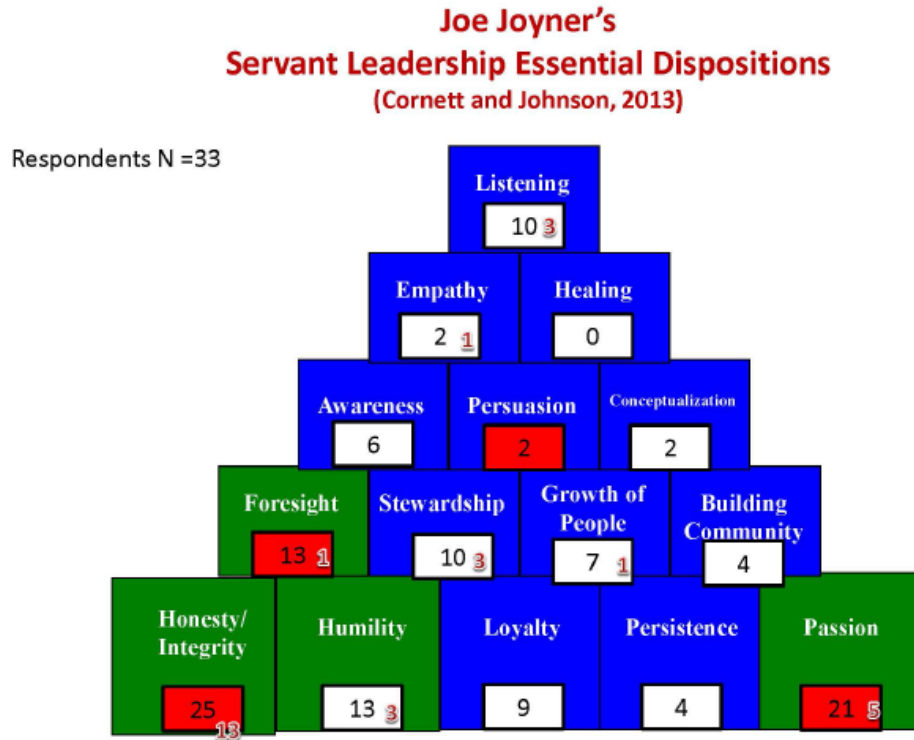
The importance of this chart is that it illustrates how when Joyner operationalizes one or more of the elements of his servant leadership PPT, the participants not only recognized it in operation upon reflection, but also knew that it was intentional and differentiated for them specifically in that individualized context.

Joyner's own ratings of his top four are in red: honesty/integrity; passion; foresight; and persuasion. The following conversation during the interview among the researchers and the superintendent is part of the dialogue shared among the three about the data and its meaning:

Cornett: *We want you to look at the fifteen variables and pick what you think are your top four. Let's bring out the interview diagram about servant leadership, and we'll go back to that in a second.*

Joyner: (scans the servant leadership chart that summarized the first 23 interviews with principals and assistant principals) *These are related… vision and being able to persuade people. They're pretty close. Trying to see the big picture. (finishes after several moments of reflection, checking 4 (honesty/integrity, foresight, persuasion, passion) probably I'm better at that.* Then Cornett asks him to circle his top one (passion).

Cornett: *So we got your top four, and passion is the number one. So, what is the passion for Joe?*

Joyner: The work… kids, the job, the work… all of it.

The researchers showed Joyner the chart with preliminary results that led to the following exchange and his discussion of situational leadership (PPT 4) in the context of servant Leadership (PPT 3):

Cornett: (shows summary of principal and assistant principals chart completed to date) *So this is the principals and the APs so far.*

Joyner: *How many people have you been out (to see)?*

Cornett: *This is 23 principals and APs…*

(laughter)

The number in black is the number that listed this (variable) as one of the top four.

Joyner: *Hmmm* (he puts on his reading glasses and is reflecting on the chart).

Cornett: *the number over here is those that listed it as their number one.*

Joyner: *Hmmm*

Cornett: *So 16 of the 23 respondents, and we asked them to put a number values (and then identify the top 4)... most did, a few refused to separate, indicating they were all 10s...*

Joyner: *Numbers are hard.*

Cornett: *With your cabinet, most of whom we did today, we just told them to pick four. So that's not compiled here. So you understand the flow here? I would not have predicted this Joe, that every box they saw (was evident) and some were NR (not rated) because they said I don't know... I'm not close enough to see that, but here's what I see. So, let's go back to Hersey and Blanchard and situational leadership... we never did anything with that part (even though it is in your PPTs) and we started out just to flesh this out* (pointing to diagram of his PPTs). *That is so dispersed.*

Joyner: *Un Huh.*

Cornett: *Which then suggests if this makes sense... just that you treat (principal named) and (another principal named) differently just to treat them fairly and that's intentional.*

Joyner: *Um hmm.*

Cornett: *Is that fair?*

Joyner: *Well that's my view of situational leadership and during different situations, some of these things pop up higher than others because of the situation and so that's why it's kind of comprehensive in its nature. These are consistent (pointing to the variables of honesty/integrity, humility, loyalty, persistence, and passion) and they stay the same, but the way you display it is situational.*

Johnson: *So, one of the things I was gonna say a second ago ... the stories that people told us match this as well. Not only did different people talk about experiencing your leadership in different ways, the same person talked about experiencing different ways at different times based on the situation.*

Joe: *Hmm*

Johnson: *And in terms of what they needed at that time.*

Cornett: *so let me step back as I understand* (pointing to the chart) *... your ability to conceptualize, to listen ...*

Joyner: *I didn't think I would get that one… listening, but there's an 8.*

Cornett: *and you are understanding their strengths and differences, and that to us is what great leadership is* (remarks about his employer in contrast). *… So, the bottom line of this Joe is neither one of us would have predicted the dispersion of this.*

Joyner: *… but in respecting their role… they have so many arrows shooting at them at once that, and the same could be said with me… sometimes you just have to reel it back and just listen. And usually when things get up here* (his office) *it's all about listening.*

Joyner thinks for a moment and looks at the researchers and references situational as a construct

I have thought that's kinda yucky, and does that mean your wishy-washy and you react to situations and you're not locked in… but, I'm locked in, but people are different and they have different needs, leaders have different needs.

Cornett: *your cabinet's got different needs*

Joyner: *oh yeah*

….

Johnson: *Joe, let me say something about this situational leadership as I'm seeing what's unfolding from the data. It's not wishy washy at all, it's really strategic, and something that surprised me, because I live in the district, I have kids in the district, I hear stuff about the district, I hear stuff about you, I had the impression of somebody really well liked and well respected and that's about all I knew about the district. I was expecting to learn more about that through this study. What I've really heard from the interviews we've done is the level of intellectual understanding and insight that goes into thinking strategically about handling those different situations differently. … conscious, deliberate understanding of the different contexts of two different schools, understanding the different contexts of different leaders, that kind of thing. There's nothing wishy washy about it from what we're seeing in the data. We had people talking about moving from one school to another and what about their skills set…*

Joyner: *I (just) did that twice… named two new principals today. I just left Landrum and selling that to the staff.*

Johnson, who supervises preservice leadership candidates in the masters programs, made a reference to a school visit and his interaction with a principal new to the district at the beginning of the year indicating the dispersion of his servant leadership construct to even the newcomers on his leadership team and how it shows up in the field:

Johnson: *I had a meeting a few months ago with an elementary teacher in the district who's a first semester masters student in our program, and within about three minutes of me meeting with her, and I met with her in her classroom, within the first three minutes she referenced servant leadership in talking about how she interacts with parents. One of the things that I see both in the literature and organizations that I've been around is the good stuff doesn't filter throughout the organization. That really got my attention.*

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Joyner: *Hmm.*

They further discuss several examples from the interviews of how administrators process these things and how they also demonstrate these dispositions in their own ways. The notion that they do this, almost organically and seamlessly is not a typical thing in many districts in the researchers' experiences, and they share this insight with Joyner.

Johnson: *… It's an unusual district; you have an unusual team.*

Joyner: *In what way?*

Johnson: *The level of self-knowledge and the level of big picture understanding. I think you cultivate it in leaders in different roles, the ability to see the trees and the forest at the same time, and that's not typical. I just served on a dissertation committee with a student who developed an instrument to measure organizational invisibility. There's a strong theme in the literature suggesting that a lot of bad things that happen in organizations happen by well-intentioned people who see their role and they don't see the big picture so they do something useful for their particular piece of it and as a result cause a problem someplace else. We've heard stories from administrators throughout the district, and Jeff can speak to the talk you gave to the staff, which points to the same thing to me. I think you actively teach people what the whole is and teach the capacity to see the whole and that makes them better. A middle school principal who thinks about high school concerns is going to be a better middle school principal.*

Joyner: *Right, right.*

Johnson references living in the district and getting to know the culture and the emphasis on staff development, the three legged stool (hire the best, coach them up, or, if necessary coach them out) and in spite of (or because of) the high student performance, the urgency among administrators in getting things even better.

Johnson: *Yeah… and I was amazed at the first couple of interactions I had with the schools as a university supervisor, the interviews (current study), and conversations with Jeff about his previous research… you guys work and pursue improvement like you're struggling to hang on. I've never seen that in a high performing district before. I've never seen a district that is this high performing take continuous improvement as seriously as you do.*

Joyner: *Yeah, well we talk about that a lot. Continuous improvement is in every part of our discussion every year. I also think that starts with what we do at the board level. Because every year we're setting some pretty ambitious goals. I do think that message has gotten out about getting better rather than resting…*

Joyner is often thinking about how to stress important concepts that impact the climate of the district and promote continuous improvement to generate discussion and deliberation among his administrative ranks around these ideas. For example, he recently purchased copies of Feltman's (2011) *The Thin Book of Trust* for the entire team and had a discussion around several of the ideas. He doesn't just mention it once, as he indicates as follows:

Last summer we talked about trust and we talked about that throughout the year. So we know the behaviors that build trust. The essential nature of humility and leadership behaviors. It seems like if you're not viewed as someone who has humility… think about that, if you're viewed as arrogant people will follow you but will they ever trust you? (Interview, 2014)

Conclusion

This paper represents an early report of results from a multi-year study investigating the impact of a superintendent's theorizing on the perceptions of members of the leadership team about his Personal Practical Theories, and especially his notion of servant leadership (a notion that has some important differences in both the number of concepts and in the nature of those

concepts in action). Our initial results confirm the importance of the action research base that occurred prior to this research, the Naturalistic Model of Leadership as a heuristic, and the depth and breadth of how the dispositions included in Joyner's conception of servant leadership have been diffused and implemented in district, principal, and assistant principal practice in the organization.

The study has built upon our thinking that Joyner's PPTs are deeply rooted in their foundational nature in the superintendent's thinking and that they have been integrated into the theorizing of his team as well. The respondents appear to be "all in" related to the overall vision and PPT constructs, for it is truly all about kids and teachers as the key to the high levels of achievement and character. As we move forward working with the rich data set, we will refine the emergent contruct blending servant leadership and situational leadership theories to articulate a *situational-servant leader* model and will seek additional insights into, among other things, the organizational dynamics and affordances that facilitate and enable communication of the shared vision and common dispositions among the superintendent and other stakeholders.

As Johnson posited, the members of the team act as if they are "hanging on" rather than resting on the laurels of a district that is by many measures the highest performing in the State of Florida. As we have learned by our interviews and observations, this is not an accident. But isn't that what being a servant leader is fundamentally about? Servant leadership is a significant part of the vision and intentional leadership in this district and that begins with the superintendent.

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[i] [i] Cornett had been a faculty member and later chair of two different departments at the University of Central Florida (UCF). While at UCF, he met Joyner when he was a principal and doctoral student and Cornett served as a member of his dissertation committee in 1995-1996. Joyner's dissertation, *A study of factors that contribute to success at New Directions Alternative School*, was a testament to his passion for student success, instructional leadership, and moral commitment to high quality teaching and learning for all students. It also was significant evidence of his intellectual ability, research skills, and ability to conceptualize and analyze data. When Cornett returned to Florida in 2008, he contacted Joyner about the possibility of working on several research projects. They have been collaborating on administrator decision-making since that time.

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