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Educators' Dualistic Perceptions of Leadership Styles during
PreK-12 Independent School Accreditation Review Processes

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore how independent school educators perceived the management styles of school leaders during accreditation review processes and associated organizational reform efforts. The research findings evidenced inconsistent educator perceptions regarding how administrators include educators in accreditation review processes. While school leaders were described as generally assuming a top-down approach by remaining the central authority on institutional accreditation efforts, some educators recalled moments of empowerment in which administrators created spaces for their feedback and leadership. This dualistic perspective appears to be the result of vague accreditation requirements enacted by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). The findings that follow are significant for administrators looking to reflect on professional accreditation practices, agencies seeking to reassess accreditation standards, and researchers who focus on how organizational assessment influences leadership techniques.

Aim

The purpose of this research was to explore how independent school educators perceived the management styles of school leaders during accreditation review processes and associated organizational reform efforts.

Problem and Significance of the Study

Independent schools rely on the standards, evaluations, and recommendations of regional and state-based accreditation agencies as indicators of institutional performance (Alam, 2005; Cram, 2014). Furthermore, independent school stakeholders on all institutional levels agree that accreditation is a necessary component to strong organizational success. Specifically, within independent school communities, teachers and administrators envision the accreditation review process as influential in how all organizational members structure and enact strategic planning, administrative efforts, classroom practices, and employment priorities (Fairman, Peirce, & Harris, 2009; Wood & Meyer, 2011).

In accordance with the inclusive nature of accreditation, the National Association of Independent Schools' (NAIS) established guidelines in their *Criteria for Effective Independent School Accreditation Practices* which state, "A broad cross-section of the community (including all faculty and staff, as well as members of the governing body and others in the community, as appropriate) participate in preparing the self-study." (NAIS, n.d.). Despite this, NAIS does not offer much clarity with regards to how administrators best include educators in the accreditation process. As a result, NAIS leaves open room for administrator interpretation of teachers' role in both the accreditation review process and subsequent reform efforts that stem from accreditation results.

Research Findings

The researcher built upon prior understandings of the concept of accreditation by assuming a constructivist epistemology that focused on providing independent school educators a platform to create meaning through deliberation about their lived experiences. Specifically, the researcher collected data from 156 valid surveys and eight 30 to 45-minute semi-structured interviews to analyze educators' perceptions of management styles of their school leaders. Utilizing open, in-vivo, and descriptive coding techniques, many concepts emerged that were later combined using axial techniques to allow for the creation of larger themes. The following were the major findings from this study:

- Educators largely perceived inclusiveness as a generally accepted characteristic of the accreditation review process and associated school reform efforts.
- Educators cited prior experiences of instances in which administrators enacted a top-down approach to creating and enacting their school's plans regarding accreditation, even if this meant rejecting the inclusive work of other stakeholders.
- Educators cited experiences in which administrators enacted a bottom-up approach to a school's plans regarding accreditation that empowered educators with the ability to assume leadership roles that ranged from serving as committee chairs, contributing authors of institutional strategic plans, and assuming responsibilities as chief accreditation officers.

Conclusion/Discussion

Results suggested that NAIS' broadly defined expectations about stakeholder inclusion contributed to the educators' perceptions of their incorporation into accreditation review processes as dualistic. On the one hand, teachers believed that their participation in accreditation processes was in a subordinate capacity that required them to receive direction from school leaders. On the other, educators also perceived the lines that defined the traditional hierarchical structure described in the previous statement to be blurred, especially when administrators created opportunities for stakeholders to collaborate.

Data indicated that educators perceived school administrators as central in determining the structure and programming of accreditation preparation efforts, especially with regards to determining widespread points of focus, committee assignments, temporary accreditation leaders, and the delegation of preparatory tasks. Participants also viewed school leaders as the ultimate authority that decided whether to accept suggestions and input from teachers.

Conversely, participants also perceived accreditation processes and associated institutional improvement efforts as moments when the entire school community looked beyond hierarchical barriers and deliberated as professional educators working towards similar goals. Within preparatory and reform portions of the process, classroom teachers served as committee chairs while administrators remained committee members. Participants also acknowledged that accreditation afforded them the opportunity to share opinions about specific functions of the school to administrators. Finally, educators perceived accreditation as an authority that mandated leaders to include teachers in ways that empowered them to provide feedback without reprisal.

Research Implications

This study is best regarded as an initial inquiry into the manner in which independent school accreditation influences perceptions of administrative practices. Specifically, for school leaders, this study may serve as a reminder to remain cognizant of their own practices to assess whether their intentions reflect their actions. For NAIS, flexibility accommodates greater variability among its member institutions; however, accreditation leaders are encouraged to assess whether current standards allow for too wide a range of administrative interpretation. Finally, for researchers, such findings would benefit being expanded to assess how other models of institutional assessment (i.e. higher education, public schools) influence stakeholder perceptions of administrative efforts and whether these perceptions match the larger intentions of evaluation agencies.

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Author Biography

Christopher Holland is a 2019 graduate of Drexel University's Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership and Management. His dissertation explored perceptions of independent school educators' experiences with the preK-12 accreditation process and institution reform efforts that stemmed from participation in these organizational evaluations. As a doctoral student, Christopher specialized in Education Policy, publishing advocacy commentaries and policy briefs about topics that ranged from California's growing teacher shortage to New York City's "PreK for All" program, IDEA funding throughout Pennsylvania schools, and the state of climate change education through the nuanced adoption of the Next Generation Science Standards.

Before attending Drexel, Christopher graduated from Teachers College, Columbia University in 2009 with an MA in Social Studies Education and Gettysburg College in 2007 with a BA in History. Since 2007, Christopher has taught a myriad of courses in high school social

studies classrooms in both public and independent school settings in both Brooklyn, NY and Hershey, PA. He currently resides in Hummelstown, PA with his wife, Dr. Jessica Cunningham, and sons, Caleb and Lucas. In the future, Christopher hopes to continue research into perceptions of institutional evaluation in public and private settings. Finally, he hopes to expand on his advocacy for social justice within educational policies' arenas across the nation.