A Shift in Hong Kong Principals’ Leadership Conceptions

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Schools in Hong Kong are now undergoing many educational reforms. With so many ideas and demanding tasks ahead, principals have been expected to bear the responsibility for implementing change. In 1991, the leadership of Hong Kong principals was described as “dictatorial” in a government document, which painted a bleak picture of the leadership being offered by Hong Kong principals at that time. However, this recent study showed that teachers perceived that principals as exerting some degree of transformational leadership in schools. All the eight dimensions of the leadership were above the mid-point on the rating scale. It seems that there is a shift in Hong Kong primary school principals leadership conceptions. This paper describes the extent to which teachers perceived their principal’s to be exercising transformational leadership. Issues concerning principal development are discussed.

The Problem

Since the early 1990s, the government has initiated a host of educational innovations. These include The the School Management Initiative and School-based Management, Parent-Teacher Association, Target Oriented Curriculum, Integration of General Subjects, the School Administration and Management System, Language Policy (enhancing students’ language proficiency: to be biliterate and trilingual), and Information Technology Education, amongst others. Nearly all schools in Hong Kong were at some point pursuing some of these innovations.

With so many challenges and demanding tasks ahead, who should take the responsibility for implementing change? Anson (1992) indicates the answer to this question:

We are in a time of rapidly changing expectations and assumptions not only in this country but worldwide ... As the pace of change increases and the demands on the education system increase, the burden to respond to those demands will fall on the shoulders of our education leaders ... (p. 303).

School leaders clearly are expected to bear this heavy burden, so leadership is a significant factor in implementing change. Anson emphasizes that: "Leadership is recognised as a critical process for changing education and is given equal weight with the studies of the content of new approaches to schooling” (p. 303). Much recent literature has emphasized school leadership as a crucial variable in educational change and reform (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Senge, 1990a; Fullan, 1991; Hallinger & Murphy, 1991; Tucker-Ladd, Merchant & Thurston, 1992; Caldwell, 1993; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990, Leithwood, Jantzi & Fernandez, 1994; VanderStoep, Anderman & Midgley, 1994).

It is believed that the quality of every member of the school community is a crucial factor in school improvement, especially the principal. However, in Hong Kong, a printed government document, "The School Management Initiative" (Education and Manpower Branch and Education Department, 1991), painted a bleak picture of the leadership being offered by Hong Kong principals at that time:

There is a widespread perception that many principals are
insufficiently experienced and inadequately trained for their task. Because proper management structures and processes are lacking, some principals are insufficiently accountable for their actions and see their post as an opportunity to become "little emperors" with dictatorial powers in the school (p. 14).

This report remarked that many enthusiastic and able teachers were frustrated by the lack of educational and managerial leadership in schools. Frustrations caused by the inadequacies of school management play a part in the diminishing attractiveness of the teaching profession. An overview of the education system conducted in the early 1980s also showed that the level of professional commitment among teachers was low (Education and Manpower Branch and Education Department, 1991).

Principals adopting a dictatorial pattern of leadership seemed to have problems in leading teachers to cope with school reforms. Louis and Miles (1990) have the same view on this and they doubt that the traditional type of school administration and management is up to the task:

There is uneasiness in the general administration and management literature with the dominant model of how to organize ... most organizations -- and particular schools -- do not look like the rational, predictable, well-controlled setting that the textbooks on planning and administration tell us they should be (p. 19).

Being one of the skeptics who believes that oppressive leadership models are the antithesis of what will be required in school reforms, Bolin (1989) argues:

Strategies of conquest, divide and rule, manipulation through human relations techniques and cultural invasion are common in administrative practice. They are problematic in a democratic society, however, because they are based on an oppressive leadership model (p. 86).

Senge (1990b) also queries the traditional view of leadership based on assumptions that people are powerless, lack vision, and are unable to master the forces of change.

Being one of the many places world wide in which schools are attempting to introduce significant change, Hong Kong offers a rich opportunity for studies related to issues of leadership and change. The study reported in this paper is about a principal leadership survey recently conducted by Yu (2000). The purpose of the survey was to explore Hong Kong principals' transformational leadership and attempt to answer the question: To what extent do teachers perceive their principals to be exercising transformational leadership?

Review of Literature

Since the mid-1980s, the term "Transformational Leadership" has appeared with increasing frequency in educational writings. Sometimes it has been used to signify an appropriate type of leadership for schools taking up the challenges of restructuring now well underway in most developed countries throughout the world (Leithwood, 1992a).

Burns (1978) notes that "... transformational leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both" (p. 20). Therefore, according to Burns's view, this kind of leadership can raise the level of commitment of both the leader and the followers. Bass (1985) argues that transformational leadership can push followers beyond the ordinary limits of performance:

To achieve follower performance beyond the ordinary limits, leadership must be transformational. Followers' attitudes, beliefs, motives, and confidence need to be transformed from a lower to a higher plane of arousal and maturity (p. x i).

Transformational leadership is the leadership of people. It is the establishment of real friendships or relationships among those who work together that gives rise to the followers’ commitment to change. As mentioned before, many educators found the traditional oppressive methods of leadership not appropriate for today's organizations (Louis & Miles, 1990; Bolin, 1989; Senge, 1990a). Bennis and Nanus (1985, p. 224) agree with this by indicating that the model of the leader who "controls, directs, prods, manipulates" is perhaps "the most damaging myth of all". Effective leaders should:

lead by pulling rather than by pushing; by inspiring rather than ordering; by creating achievable, though challenging, expectations and rewarding progress toward them rather than by manipulating; by enabling people to use their own initiative and experiences rather than by denying or constraining their