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School Leadership:
A comparison of Singaporean and Indian cases

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ABSTRACT

The role of the principal in transforming a school is a core theme within the education literature on leadership. However, such work is mostly developed in a 'Western' cultural environment, representing a particular set of values. This ignores the possibility that although leadership may be universal, the way it is described and practised may differ from culture to culture. Drawing from research carried out in Singapore and India, we present in this article how the teachers and students perceive the transformational effects of the school principals from an organisational and cultural perspective. This qualitative research uses in-depth interviews supplemented by participant observations to understand the influence of cultural variables on the practice of transformational leadership. In one case, despite cultural tensions, the findings suggest that the practice of transformational leadership has facilitated a positive culture in terms of collective learning and connectedness to the workplace and a leader among the organisational members. In the other case, transformational actions influenced sharing and learning and enhanced motivation where the leader consciously focused on creating a culture through actions aimed at achieving the vision which itself was in tune with the context.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on leadership in schools, especially that focussing on change management, invariably treats the principal as the core agent in the transformative process. However, such work is largely grounded and developed in a 'Western cultural' environment, representing a particular set of values. While there are many studies that have examined the role of leadership in western cultures, our present study examines the role of leadership in a Asian context schools in Singapore and India. According to Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999), schools are continually challenged to increase their performance in terms of their approaches to teaching and learning. In a school, any kind of improvement, innovation or changes will depend very much on the leader of the school. This explains the perceived importance of leadership as it is a precondition for an effective school. This is further supported by Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) who cited a 1977 U.S. Senate Committee Report on Equal Educational Opportunity that identified the principal as the single most influential person in a school. Also, it is claimed that the success of 'good schools' are the result of the 'quality of the leadership of the head' (DES, 1977:36). However, with these great premiums placed on the role of principal, there is still a lack of well articulated research as to how a principal transforms a school to compete in the increasingly competitive environment in which schools operate. In this article we present a comparative study on teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership in Singapore and India schools. Our specific interest was to understand how transformational leadership is perceived and practiced in different cultural contexts.

TRANSFORMATION LEADERSHIP

The increased interest in transformational leadership can be attributed to the challenges posed to schools for a restructure and better management in terms of enhancing the performance and motivation of students and teachers (Barnett, McCormick & Conners, 2001). Some researchers claim that transformational leadership is suitable for bringing about complex changes that are required for continued sustainable improvements by schools to cope with the dynamic environment (Burns, 1978; Fullan, 2003).

The idea of transformational leadership has gained wide popularity among academics and school practitioners (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Jung & Yammarino, 2001; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Burns (1978) can be considered to be the key theorist behind the idea of transformational leadership through his prize winning book on 'leadership'. Based on his

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analysis and research, he claimed that leaders possessed two aspects of power, that is, motives or purposes and resources. Burns' seminal work laid the foundation to distinguish between transactional and transformational leadership and emphasised that both these types of leadership reflects the appreciation of power-as-relationships. He also claimed that most leaders displayed the qualities of transactional leadership than transformational leadership. Since then, the concept of research has been increasingly carried out linking transformational leadership and culture of the organisation (Dalin, 1996).

A review of literature shows that leadership is associated with a change in cultural context in which people work and has the potential to transform or revitalise for higher work performance and enhanced productivity. This potential to reinvent, inspire and redirect organisational members, especially during periods of uncertainty, is therefore, considered transformational. Transformational leadership is considered to be a process where 'leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation' (p.20). Thus, transformational leadership is a 'moral art' rather than a technical science (Sergiovanni, 1992). Implicit in this view is that while transformational leaders play a significant role in appealing to higher levels of morality and commitment with, and in the followers, the 'followers and leaders are bound together in the transformation process' (Marks & Printy, 2003; Yukl, 1999). This is in sharp contrast with transactional leadership where leaders 'motivate to appeal to followers' self-interest. It is evident that transformational leadership does not operate on superficial change but one that brings about systemic change. Transformational leadership is concerned with relationships between leaders and the 'followers' for mutual benefit and good (Leithwood et al., 1999). The focus on developing and expanding the capacity and potential of followers to their maximum has extended and added value to the concept of transformational leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003). A transformational leader, in a school context undertakes the continuous professional development of teachers and builds the capacity for learning within the school (Leithwood et al., 1999). Several researches have attested to the effectiveness of transformational leadership in schools (Berg & Sleegers, 1996; Leithwood et al., 1999).

Transformational leadership is made up of four factors: charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Transformational leaders develop a vision, inspire and collectively bond organisational members to that vision. They communicate high expectations, promote new and creative ways of dealing with problems and treats individuals according to their needs (Bryman, 1992; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Hater & Bass, 1988).

In the Indian context, transformational leaders have been found to exhibit these unique characteristics – nurturing, expertise, personal touch, simple living, loyalty, self-sacrificing, and giving model other than the universal dimensions. These contributed to 56% of the transformational leadership practices where as the universal dimensions contributed to only 44% (Singh & Krishnan, 2005). They later validated a new scale and found that there were unique and universal dimensions to transformational leadership in Indian context (Singh & Krishnan, 2005).   Kejriwal and Krishnan (2004) found that culture influences transformational leadership by shaping the leader's worldview, some of which enhance transformational leadership.

Research on transformational leadership has also suggested that transformational leadership is strongly related to positive perceptions of headteacher's or principal's effectiveness, organizational level effects and student effects (Leithwood et al. 1999). According to Leithwood et al. (1999) transformational leadership in schools may be identified by a number of core leadership activities:

- Setting directions (includes vision-building)
- Developing people
- Promoting and nurturing a learning culture
- Building relationships within and with the school community.

These activities and behaviours have resulted in teacher collaboration, teacher motivation and to improve teachers' self-efficacy. While transformation leadership is contested by some (Currie & Lockett, 2007; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1991), a recent literature review on transformational leadership has suggested that in general, transformational leadership is still strongly related to positive perceptions of a headteacher's or principal's effectiveness, organizational level effects and student effects (Leithwood et al. 1999).

Seven country reports on school leadership found that successful leaders: used *setting directions* practices unique to the country context and commonly had a strong focus on student learning, *developing people* the practices used by successful leaders differed across the countries, and *redesign organization* through collaborative cultures, designing structures for participative decision making and building productive relationships (Leithwood 2005) . However, there has been little empirical research on the effects of transformational leadership across culture and this article attempts to fill this gap and contributes to cross-cultural

literature by adding about how culture promotes or inhibits leadership processes outside North America and Europe.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study research was conducted in Singapore and India. The choice of both countries was driven by the feasibility and also for comparative purpose. Each case focused on leadership in a school context. Both schools and all participants were provided pseudonyms. The principal from Singapore was a female (Jenny) with 15 years of experience as a principal. The Indian school leader (Raman) was the founder of the school and the chairman of the board managing the school. He was male with more than thirty years experience in the field of education as a teacher and administrator.

The research took place over a period of 3 months, using ethnographic methods. About 16 staff members (Singapore) and 13 (India) took part in the face-to-face interviews that lased approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Information was gathered on staffs' perception of issues ranging from school visioning process, culture, leadership styles, learning, professional growth and the type of activities and behaviours that had the greatest impact on their workplace.

Other data sources include participant observation, scrutinise school documents such as the school's newsletter, brochures, organisational and public documents. These were used in the triangulation process to verify organisational events and practices. The data was analysed using Constas's (1992) category documentation.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

In this research, we modified Leithwood et al. (1999) transformational leadership model and the findings are categorised here in terms of key constructs of transformational leadership, with quotations exemplifying responses to each school. An overview of the key themes and differences in each of the cases is highlighted in Table 1.

SINGAPORE SCHOOL

Setting Directions

The interviews and discussions with participants strongly pointed to staff having a strong sense of purpose and direction under the leadership of the principal. The principal carried out activities that resembled some elements of transformational leadership style. For example, the visioning process involved all staff of the school, whereby the vision was collaboratively

crafted and clearly articulated in terms of how staff can collectively achieve the goals in terms of teaching and learning in the school. The envisioning process has also led to acquiring staff commitment and also has resulted in setting a clear direction that the participants were very appreciative of. For example, a teacher commented:

> "It is a very good feeling to contribute my ideas and be part of the vision. We were involved in the process because my principal believes that we (teachers) are the key people in the school. She has given a clear sense of direction and we are happy to work together towards achieving that vision".

The process and importance of vision has been a dormant theme in the transformational school leadership (Bass, 1985; Bryman, 1993) and also it is the most important aspect of transformational leadership (Howell & Avolio, 1993; Seltzer & Bass, 1990). Though the participants understand that their contributions, as well as those of other members determine the overall vision of the school, they credited the principal as a highly visionary and also who has the capacity of get every individual to co-construct the vision. This ability of creating a collective sense of ownership and commitment is the result of staffs' strong admiration for the principal. This is evident from the discussions with the participants where many of them classified the principal as someone 'unique', 'special' and 'different from other leaders'.

Despite these positive responses, a few participants pointed out that the communal approach towards visioning was an issue for them as it altered their traditional way of doing things in the school. They explained that they were accustomed to a top-down decision making style and as such, they felt that the collective visioning process was too time consuming and was not really necessary. As one teacher explained:

> "I understand the advantages of everyone getting involved in coming up with our school vision, but it takes up too much time. In the past, the vision statements were done by the Principal and Vice Principal. We followed and worked accordingly. It is easier to follow than to be involved in the long decision making process".

Implicit in the above comment is that it may not be important for staff to participate in the visioning process on the basis that traditionally it has been passed down from the top management to other staff in the school. This suggests the cultural compliant attitude by Singaporean employees who will readily accept instructions that come from top management (Retna & Byson, 2007). This thinking and behaviour is also attributed to Singapore's high power distance where hierarchy and position are highly valued by employees (Retna, 2005).

Though, the principals' leadership style encouraged participation and collective decision making, cultural behaviour appears to be an impediment as authoritarian leadership is considered as a positive attribute among Singapore school principals (Zhang, 1994).

Motivating Staff

One of the effects of the collective ownership and commitment was the way it affected the teachers in the way they carried out their teaching and learning for their students. Being involved and being aware of what is required to achieve the mission and goals of the school has helped staff to set higher expectations for themselves. Most of the participants expressed that they feel highly motivated to perform and few of them even acknowledged that in the past they did not put in much effort in carrying out their administrative roles as they only considered teaching as their 'core duty'. However, now with a clear direction and being valued by their co-workers and the principal, there is a 'motivational force' within staff to perform their best in teaching and other administrative duties. This is clearly articulated by a teacher:

> "I am motivated to do both teaching and admin roles beyond the school expectation. Through my principal I understand my competencies and how I can help my students to achieve their academic goals as well as the school target".

The findings suggest that the Principal has impacted on their behaviour and attitudes toward their performance and motivation. During the interviews, most of the participants were enthusiastic in explaining about how their motivations have been enhanced by the Principal. Words such as 'she understands our needs and feelings', and 'when you talk to her, you feel motivated' shows that the principal has a significant impact and influence on staff at work. Therefore, this explains the transformation the principal has effected on the staff who feel intrinsically motivated to align their goals with the school's vision. On the contrary, a minority of participants felt that they are not very comfortable to consult or engage in discussions with the principal on an individual basis. This is because they were not sure about the level of trust that exist between the principal and staff. This is commented by a junior teacher:

> "I must remember that she is also our big boss. Even though she is helpful, cares for us and motivate us to work better, I can't really discuss everything with her".

Despite attempting to provide individual attention and motivation, some staff are not able to take advantage of the opportunities due to their cultural inhibitions. Trust is an important

element in developing a good relationship between staff and leader. As the above quote suggests, there seems to be some evidence that there was a low degree of trust between the staff and principal. This is in line with the findings of a study that found that most Singaporeans do not trust each other easily (Kau, Tan & Wirtz 1998). The 'unsafe' to speak or relate feelings to the principal could also be the result of unequal power relations between superiors and staff in Singapore.

Staff Development

One of the themes that emerged from the interviews was about development of staff. Most participants commented positively about the support and caringness provided for their professional and personal growth. Findings show that many elements of transformational leadership were practiced by the principal such as showing respect and care at an individual and school level, willingly and readily be available to staff when required and most importantly supporting and encouraging professional development. This is explained by a teacher:

> "My principal cares for us a lot. She encourages us to develop our skills by
> going for in-house and external training, seminars, and workshops.
> Attending such trainings has helped me to be a reflective and creative
> teacher. This is all possible because of my principal".

Providing individualised consideration is an important element of transformational leadership (Podasakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman & Fetter 1990). Findings show that the principal has enabled professional development for staff through her genuine care and support. Most participants expressed appreciation for her willingness to take on the mentoring and development roles and to attend to specific needs of the staff. One teacher praised the principal by commenting:

> "She is a gem. She knows how to coach and motivate individuals.
> Because of her, my attitude towards work has changed. In a nutshell, she
> really genuinely cares for everyone. Her support and motivation makes
> the school a lively and a happy place to work".

These and other responses suggest that the principal has transformed the attitude of the staff in the school. Though the findings show that the school staffs' attitude towards work has been positive and meaningful, there a few participants who voiced their dissatisfaction on the grounds that the principal's leadership style might not be appropriate. For example, a teacher summarised:

> "Even to attend a seminar or training, we are consulted. The principal should just tell us to go for the training and we will go. I prefer that she tells me what course I should attend than me thinking so hard about my professional development".

In general the above quote reveals the preference for non participative decision making processes so characteristic of bureaucratic practices in Singapore schools. This cultural thinking posed a dilemma for few participants who subtly showed some resistance and discomfort towards the principal's leadership.

INDIAN SCHOOL

The Indian school was started by the school leader, Mr Raman (name changed) in 1997 and has grown to more than 2500 students and 135 teachers. It is acknowledged as one of the best schools in the region with best results in the board exams (10th and 12th standards).

Setting Directions

The vision of the school is the vision of the founder and chairman, Raman and was not done through a visioning exercise. Every teacher is aware of the vision 'equal opportunity for quality education', the focus on spoken English, and emphasis on specialised support for weaker students. However, the vision is clearly identified as the "Raman's" vision by everyone. He had started the school to cater to the need of the people in the town, as parents were sending their wards to far off places to give them a good education. From day one, Raman articulated a unique policy of 'no screening and no retention', which was the norm followed by other schools. The vision of equal opportunity for education irrespective of caste, creed or religion inspired the teachers and it was further reinforced by the policy of 'no screening and no retention'. Raman communicated a grand vision of best academic results with no screening or retention, locating it within the context of the need for quality education in his town, and the plight of the parents and students.

> "It is Sir's vision that has created this school and guided us in this tremendous growth and achievements. It is his vision to provide quality education for every one who wants to. We admit every student who applies. Moreover, he believes that weaker students need more support and it's the responsibility of the teacher to ensure results, hence we never detain a student in any class. He has a noble cause and we all are happy to play our part in achieving it."

The context sensitive service orientation has communicated a powerful vision which every member of the school identifies with. There is a collective ownership for the vision across the school, even though the vision is that of the founder. Teachers' total identification with the vision ensured the harmonious focus of energy towards achieving it. Every teacher feels that his/her daily activities are leading to achieving the best performance. He has not thrust on others his vision but by appealing to the needs of the people and their service orientation, he had ensured that there is total buy in for the vision. Raman is called 'visionary', 'service oriented', 'unique' and 'great' by the teachers. Because of the goal consensus, a collaborative work culture has been institutionalised which has led to performance orientation. Results and high performance is achieved through alignment of organizational processes and work culture. Moreover the unique, grand, and larger than life vision has necessitated high performance.

Interestingly there were no negative views or even criticisms against Raman. It seems to be due to collective acceptance of the vision rather than out of fear of contradicting the founder chairman.

Motivating Staff

Every teacher is highly motivated, committed and passionate about teaching. The clarity of the vision exemplified the tasks and the whole school is focused on achieving the same. The vision appeals to the service orientation and the thought that they are contributing to society was highly motivating. Periodic meetings with all the teachers to communicate the organizational decisions, personal attention given to each teacher's growth and openness i.e. 'I am always available' has motivated the teachers to go beyond the call of duty to work for the vision.

> "I am very happy and excited to be working here. This school is unlike any other school. We all want to ensure that we get the best results. We work beyond our timings to achieve results. I have stayed in the hostel during exam times so that I can give personalised attention to weaker students. I would wake up early in the morning and stay awake till late night and be with students the whole time.
>
> People are very helping and professional here. I don't have to bother about anything other than academics. So I give my best to students."

The clarity of the vision, its linkages to individual's teaching, a larger purpose, absence of any distractions, professional work climate, collaborative and learning culture, opportunities for learning and growth, and the individualised approach of Raman are mentioned by teachers as the motivating factors for high performance. Because of the high levels of motivation and commitment, the teachers go beyond the call of the duty to ensure high performance. Many of them work weekends, and late nights when ever required, so that the weaker students as well as bright students are given specialised attention to achieve their full potential. Surprisingly, next to Raman and his vision, the professionalism and lack of distractions in petty things and politics are stated by many, as motivators.

Staff Development

The opportunity for learning and growth is one of the aspects mentioned by every teacher. The learning is institutionalised through organizational structure, processes and culture. The grand vision required fast scalability, which was complicated by the combined effect of the need for high performance and lack of good teachers in the labour market. Fresh recruits as well as experienced teachers are regularly evaluated in terms of teaching effectiveness and feedback and suggestions for improvement provided by senior teachers. Senior teachers are always available to address any academic and personal concerns. Raman kept an open office and would entertain any query, academic or personal, and would give suggestions based on his vast experience. Many recount of the difficult and complex situations tackled easily because of the help from senior teachers and Raman. Staff development is institutionalised in the collaborative work practices.

> "Senior teachers give feedback and suggestions regularly. I can go to seniors whenever I face a problem. If it is a difficult one we can always go to sir. Because of his experience, he gives simple solutions to even difficult problems."

> "Sir is always available to help us out. If we have any problem academically or even personally we can approach him any time."

Attention to growth and development is not only through personal involvement by Raman, but also through the collaborative work culture and institutionalised practices facilitated by the structure. Every teacher appreciated the learning opportunity provided by the school and the difference it made to them personally and professionally.

> "I would never have learnt so much anywhere else. I have seen the best and the weakest students. I have learnt a lot after joining here. Now I am confident I can teach any class with ease and give good results."

Table 1: Summary of key themes/differences exhibited in each of the cases.

Singaporean Case	Indian Case
Setting Direction • Collective vision • participative processes	• Principal's personal vision • Rooted in context • Buy-in by staff
Motivating staff • Principal perceived as a contributor to sustaining staff motivation • Low degree of trust between staff and principal	• Principal perceived as the key motivator for high level of performance • High degree of trust belief in achieving the goals set by the principal
Staff development • Professional and personal development highly encouraged and supported by principal • Principal perceived as meeting individual needs of staff	• Institutional practices/structures/processes facilitate professional development • Principal and senior teachers undertake coaching and mentoring roles
Participative decision making • High level of involvement	• Learning and collaborative culture • Unquestioning mindset towards decisions made by principal
Dissenting voices/issues • Raised by some participants	• Not a single criticism/negative expressions by participants

CONCLUSION

There are interesting similarities and differences in transformational leadership in schools across Singapore and India. In the Singapore case there were dissenting voices, whereas none was heard in India. The Singapore school vision was a shared collective vision developed through participative processes, whereas in the Indian school the vision was the school leader's personal vision which was rooted in the context. The motivation is primarily through personalised attention of the Principal in the Singapore case and through grand, larger than life vision and collaborative professional work culture in India. Staff development again was through personalised attention in the Singapore case and personalised attention across the school through institutionalised collaboration for learning and growth. It is interesting to note that the context has shaped the vision and transformational practices in the Indian school and individual style in the Singapore school.

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