Are school leaders born or made? Examining factors of leadership styles of Malaysian school leaders

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Abstract

This study was conducted to identify factors of thinking and leadership styles of a group of Malaysian primary and secondary school leaders (n=85). The instrument “Thinking and Leadership Styles” was used to identify thinking styles (critical style or creative style) and leadership styles (closed style or open style) of the subjects. Results show that the majority of the school leaders implemented critical thinking with open leadership style. School grade, type of school, gender, age, working experience, educational background are significant predictors of leadership style. The findings reject claims that leaders are purely born or purely made.

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1. Introduction

Leadership style and thinking style of leaders have been described as two essential elements for school effectiveness. Leadership was defined as the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members (House et al., 2002). According to Schramm (2005), there are two types of leadership based on the model of open and closed societies. Open leadership referred to leaders who believe that the employees will show initiative, engagement and independence. Therefore the power is shared equally between leader and employees. On the other hand, closed leadership referred to unequally sharing of power; the power is located at the leadership. Regulations are not created by conventions, but by forces of circumstances.

Schramm (2005) opined that it’s not easy for the leader to consider the pros and cons of open and closed leaderships and to find the right mix. This is because “orientation and certainty in a closed organization are confronted with incapacitation, demoralize and dogmatism, while on the other hand, equality, initiative and innovation have to face dissent, egoism and lack of controllability in an open organization” (p19). According to Schramm (2005), both leadership styles have their own attractiveness but also their shortcomings, and the goal should be to find the right temporally, spatial and situational balance between them.

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2. Relationship between leadership style, thinking style and demographic variables

Some scholars (Popa, 2012; Clawson, 2008; McCrae and Costa, 1987) stated that the two types of leadership styles are associated with thinking styles of leaders. According to Popa (2012), an effective leader is creative and open towards new approaches and towards people. He is able to encourage divergent thinking and innovativeness within the organization and provides individual encouragement and support with individual consideration. These points of view are consistent with previous research findings. For example, a previous study conducted on a group of 1500 company managers (ages range from 20 to 45 years old) showed that openness to experience had a positive correlation with leadership style (Noordin, et al., 2011). Another study had also showed that there was a significant and positive correlation between leadership and creative thinking of the leaders (Isaksen, Babj & Lauer, 2003).

Similarly, Ployhart et al. (2001) found that openness was associated with effective leadership and individuals with high openness to experience are likely to score high in creative thinking. The findings of the previous studies support the theory of transformational leadership (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Bass & Avolio, 1990) that an effective school leader must be able to bring transformation to the school and people inside the school to adapt the changes, and able to adjust the school according to the situation.

However, some previous studies have also indicated that there was a significant and positive correlation between leadership skill and critical thinking (Semerci, 2010; Ricketts & Rudd, 2003; Rollins, 1990). This is because critical thinking is an essential element for decision making. It is a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential that would help the leader to act correctly on any situation (Facione, 1990).

To understand effective leadership, internal and external factors associated with leadership style should be studies. Popa (2012) claimed that if an organization wants to improve its performance, it is the leadership style and its factors that should be analyzed and adapted to new requirements. Some studies have been conducted to identify the association between leadership style with thinking style and demographic variables, such as gender (e.g. Singh, Nadim, Ezzedeen, 2012; Carless, 1998; Dhillon, 1989), age (e.g. Vesterinen, et al., 2012; Nwafor, 2012; Rehman, et al., 2012), school grade (e.g. Ibrahim, 2013; Abbaspour, Heydarinejad, Azmsha, 2012), working experience (e.g. Cara, 2012; Lennon, 2012), educational background (e.g. Thrash, 2012; Rehman, et al., 2012) and type of school (e.g. Abbaspour, Heydarinejad, Azmsha, 2012; Iqbal, et al. 2012). However, results of the studies are inconsistent. Some studies indicated positive, while others shown either negative or no relationship between leadership styles and demographic variables. Based on the inconsistency evidence of the literature, the objectives of this study were to identify (1) leadership styles and thinking styles, (2) the relationship between leadership styles and thinking styles, and (3) demographic factors that contribute to leadership styles of school leaders.

3. Methodology

This survey study employed a descriptive-correlational design. According to Chua (2006), survey research with descriptive-correlational design collects data at a particular timeframe with survey questionnaire to present the association between variables. Hence, the descriptive-correlational design was used to describe leadership styles and thinking styles, as well as their correlation among the school leaders. Besides that, the design helps the researchers to ascertain the demographic factors that associate with leadership styles and thinking styles.

4. Subjects of the Study

The subjects are 85 school leaders from 85 schools located at the Perak state in Malaysia (20 secondary school principals and 65 primary school headmasters). The subjects were randomly selected from a school population (n=130) at a 95% confidence level (p< .05) based on the Sample Size Determination Table (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).
5. Instrumentation

In this study, the instrument used to measure leadership styles and thinking styles of the school leaders is a computer-based psychological test - The Thinking-Leadership Styles Test” (TLS) (Chua, 2004; 2009). This instrument was awarded a gold medal at the 21th International Invention and Innovation Technology Exhibition (ITEX, 2012). The test has 35 multi-choice items. Item 1 to 25 collect data for thinking styles while item 26 to 35 collected data for leadership styles. For leadership styles, each item provide choices for open and closed leadership style statements and for thinking style, each item provide choices for creative and critical thinking style statements. Time allocated for a subject to answer the test is 30 minutes.

6. Results

6.1. Thinking and leadership styles of the school leaders

The data in Table 1 shows that the majority of school leaders practiced critical thinking style (n=42, 49.4%) and balanced thinking style (n=42, 49.4%). Less than 2% of the school leaders possessed creative thinking style (Table 1). As for leadership style, open leadership style is the popular leadership style practiced by the school leaders in schools. More than two-third of the school leaders possessed open leadership style (n=69, 81.2%), and less than 5% of the leaders practiced closed leadership style (n=4, 4.7%), while nearly 15% of the leaders practiced mixed leadership style (n=12, 14.1%).

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of subjects’ thinking and leadership styles

| Variable       | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------|-----------|----------------|
| Thinking styles|           |                |
| Creative       | 1         | 1.2            |
| Balanced       | 42        | 49.4           |
| Critical       | 42        | 49.4           |
| Total          | 85        | 100            |
| Leadership style|          |                |
| Open           | 69        | 81.2           |
| Mixed          | 12        | 14.1           |
| Closed         | 4         | 4.7            |
| Total          | 85        | 100            |

6.2. Relationship between thinking style and leadership style

Table 2 shows no significant correlation between thinking style and leadership style (r = .10, p > .05). The result indicates that leadership style of the school leaders does not have a significant association with their thinking style.

Table 2: Pearson product moment correlation between thinking style and leadership style

| Correlation | Leadership style | Sig. (2 tailed) |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Thinking    | .103             | .348            |

6.3. Demographic factors of thinking and leadership styles of school leaders

Results of the Stepwise Multiple Regression Test in Table 3 show that the only demographic factor that significantly predicts thinking style of the school leaders is age. Age contributes 5.1% of thinking style of the subjects [R² = .051; F(1, 83) = 4.43; p< .05]. Based on Cohen’s benchmark (Cohen, 1988), age has a small effect on leadership style (a factor has a small effect size on the dependent variable if R² smaller than .13). In this case, other demographic variables gender, working experience, educational status and school grade are not significant factors of thinking style of the school leaders.
Table 3: Results of multiple regression test on factors of thinking styles of school leaders

| Model | Variables Entered | R  | R²  |
|-------|-------------------|----|-----|
| 1     | Age               | .225 | .051 |

Summary of ANOVA

| Model | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F    | Sig. |
|-------|----------------|----|-------------|------|------|
| 1 Regression | 2.064 | 1 | 2.064 | 4.43 | .038(a) |
| Residual | 38.689 | 83 | .466 |     |      |
| Total | 40.753 | 84 |     |     |      |

*Predictors: Age; *Dependent Variable: Thinking style

Table 4: Results of multiple regression test on factors of leadership styles of school leaders

| Model | Variables Entered | R  | R²  |
|-------|-------------------|----|-----|
| 1     | School grade, type of schools, gender, age, working experience, educational status(a) | .706(a) | .498 |

Summary of ANOVA

| Model | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F    | Sig. |
|-------|----------------|----|-------------|------|------|
| 1 Regression | 10.43 | 6 | 4.73 | 5.34 | .00(a) |
| Residual | 100.74 | 78 | 1.29 |     |      |
| Total | 111.17 | 84 |     |     |      |

*Predictors: School grade, type of school, gender, age, working experience, educational status; *Dependent Variable: Leadership style

Besides that, the results of Stepwise Multiple Regression Test in Table 3 show that six demographic factors, i.e. school grade, type of school, gender, age, working experience and educational status are significant predictors of leadership style of the school leaders. The factors contribute a variance 49.8% of leadership style of the subjects [R² = .498; F(6, 78) = 5.34; p< .05].

7. Discussion and suggestions

Results of the descriptive analysis show that the Malaysian school leaders are practicing open leadership, and sharing of power between schools leaders and teachers exists in the Malaysian schools. However, most of the leaders exhibited critical thinking style and less than two percents of the school leaders exhibited creative thinking style. This finding implies that the school leaders placed more logical, systematic, consistency, analytic, precise and structured in their leadership but on the other hand, they did not emphasis on creativity, innovation and idea generation. The finding indicates that the leaders need to emphasis more creativity in leadership (less than 2% of the school leaders exhibited creative thinking style). This is important because the theory of transformational leadership (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Bass & Avolio, 1990) states that to be effective, leaders must be able to bring the transformation to the organization and people inside the organization to adapt the changes. Effective leader is creative and open towards new approaches and towards people. Effective leaders encourage divergent thinking and innovativeness within the organization (Popa, 2012; Noordin, et al., 2011).

Results also show that age is the only demographic factor that significantly predicts thinking style of the school leaders, and it has a positive effect on their thinking style. In this study, the 31 to 35 years old group has the highest mean score for creative thinking style score while the 51 to 55 years old group has a highest critical thinking style score. It means the school leaders tend to be more critical in thinking when they grow older. This phenomenon can possibly be explained by referring to the model of creativity process (Lehman, 1953) that creativity of human being decreases gradually after early adulthood (the age of 30 to 35), diversely, critical thinking increases gradually from early adulthood (Chua, 2004).

Result of analysis also shows that six demographic factors, i.e. school grade, type of school, gender, age, working experience, educational status are significant predictors of leadership style and the factors predict nearly fifty percent of leadership style of the school leaders. It implies that half of leadership style of a school leader in the school population was influenced by the demographic variables. This finding rejects the proposal of some scholars that leaders are purely born or purely made. This is because inborn qualities alone are not enough to make a leader. Part of leadership qualities is determined by internal and external factors – in this case are school grade, type of
school, gender, age, working experience, educational status. According to Popa (2012), the inborn qualities need to be developed, knowledge needs to be acquired and most of all, experience needs to be accumulated.

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