The leadership capacities of aspiring principals in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper reports a study on the leadership capacities of a group of 185 aspiring principals. A questionnaire consisting of 24 questions was constructed to examine the levels of leadership capacities of these aspirants. The findings indicate that the aspirants seemed to feel more competent in the leadership area of ‘teacher professional growth and development’ than they did with regard to ‘quality assurance and accountability’, ‘learning, teaching and curriculum’, ‘strategic direction and policy environment’, ‘external communication and connection to the outside world’, and finally ‘staff and resources management’.

Keywords: Aspiring principal, leadership capacities, school leaders, principal training

1. Introduction

For schools to meet the ever-changing challenges and the increasing demands of a 21st century society, principals as school leaders must be more professionally and internationally competent than ever before (Education Department, 2002). It thus makes the principalship an important issue to study. For vice-principals to become effective leaders, they must be better trained in the workplace for the principalship (Hartzell, 1993). The Education Bureau (EDB) of Hong Kong identifies six core areas of leadership for an aspiring principal training program. These core area competences framed the themes we studied. The purpose of the study aimed to obtain a better understanding of the aspirants’ levels of leadership capacities they possess, in general, and the refinement of the training program for aspirants, in particular.

2. Leadership capacities of school leaders

The importance of school leadership to effective schooling, staff development, school improvement and educational reforms has been supported in numerous studies (e.g. Caldwell & Spinks, 1992; Walker & Kwan, 2009). Recently, schools have been facing the problem of principal shortages. There is increasing international anecdotal and empirical evidence that attracting suitably qualified people to become school principals is becoming increasingly difficult (Sachs, 2004). According to Harris, Brown & Abbott (2006), this trend has highlighted the need to think beyond the predominant model of individual headship to working in teams to succeed leadership.

Hallinger (2005) has found that the instructional leadership capacity of principals includes creating a shared sense of purpose in the school, fostering the continuous improvement of school through development planning, developing a school culture aimed at innovation and improvement of teaching and learning, coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student learning outcomes, shaping the reward structure, organizing and monitoring a wide range of activities, and being a visible presence in the school. In today’s education systems, scholars in
educational leadership agree that distributed leadership is the most recent significant conceptual development to emerge in the field (Harris, 2008; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Distributed leadership is characterized as a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working together. A distributed leadership perspective therefore recognizes that there are multiple leaders and that leadership activities are widely shared within and between organizations (Harris, 2008). Distributed leadership acknowledges the work of all individuals who contribute to leadership practice (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Bolman & Deal (1997) suggest four leadership orientations in organizations namely: structural leadership, human resource leadership, political leadership and symbolic leadership. Caldwell (2003), on the other hand, contends that four types of leadership are of paramount importance if a school vision is to be realized. They are educational, strategic, responsive and cultural leadership.

3. Principal leadership development context in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, newly appointed principals and aspiring principals are required to have a good mastery of leadership capacities for the new paradigm of education development in the 21st century. In the years prior to 2000, primary and secondary school principals were not required to complete any training programs. Resting on the traditional apprenticeship model, they were prepared mostly by moving up the ranks from classroom teachers to heads of departments, to vice principal positions and eventually to school principal positions (Pang, 2007). New principals were only required to attend a fundamental program on school administration. Even if there were training programs for newly appointed principals or serving principals, they were usually organized on an ad hoc basis (Walker & Dimmock, 2006). In 1999, the Government of Hong Kong attempted to propose a principal training framework to upgrade the capacity of principals and to develop a culture of continuous professional development (CPD) among principals. However, because there were reservations, proposals were not uniformly received by different types of principal associations.

In 2002, a consultative paper on ‘Continuous Professional Development for School Excellence’ stipulated different types of continuous professional development (CPD) for aspiring principals (APs), newly appointed principals (NAPs) and serving principals (SPs). A certificate for principalship (CFP) was then introduced to ensure that APs met definite leadership requirements before assuming the role of principalship. After the consultation period, the Government formally announced the policy that all APs are required to attain the CFP from 2004 onwards. The CFP process is composed of three parts: (1) a needs analysis aiming at enabling APs to understand and reflect on their own strengths and areas for further development; (2) a designated course which comprises not less than 72 course hours and covers six designated core areas of leadership with built-in assessment; and (3) presentation of a portfolio which is a formative account containing the aspirant’s career highlights in the form of reflective journals and a personal belief statement (Education Department, 2002).

4. The research framework and methodology

As required by the Education Bureau (EDB) of Hong Kong, teachers attending the AP program must have at least five years’ teaching experiences. All APs are required to be prepared in four leadership domains including (1) strategic leadership; (2) instructional leadership; (3) organizational leadership; and (4) community leadership. This domains cover six core areas of leadership capacities namely (1) strategic direction and policy environment; (2) learning, teaching and curriculum; (3) teacher professional growth and development; (4) staff and resources management; (5) quality assurance and accountability; and (6) external communication and connection to the outside world. These six core areas of leadership were employed as the operational framework of the study. To examine the levels of leadership capacities the aspirants possessed in the above-mentioned six core areas, a questionnaire consisting of 24 questions was constructed. Other questions included participants’ gender, years of teaching and reasons for attending the AP training program. The questionnaires were distributed to 185 APs of two cohorts before the commencement of the training program. In addition, five principals were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, the data of which helped supplement the findings from the survey study.

5. Findings

5.1 Profile of aspiring principals
A total number of 185 questionnaires were applied to AP training participants. The data presented a very interesting profile of the APs. Of these 185 APs, one hundred and five came from aided schools that were managed by non-government organizations. The rest were working in the government schools and direct subsidy schools. Eighty-two of them came from primary schools. The samples were composed of 107 female and 72 male participants (Table 1). According to Pang (2007), the number of women occupying the principal position is on the rise at both primary and secondary school levels. In this study, female aspirants were more than male in the primary section while male aspirants were more than female in the secondary section.

Table 1  APs (N=185) by gender

| Gender     | Male          | Female        |
|------------|---------------|---------------|
| APs        | 72 (42.2%)    | 107 (57.8%)   |

Table 2  APs (N=185) by years of experience

| Years of experiences | Frequency (%) |
|----------------------|---------------|
| 6 to 10              | 13 (7)        |
| 11 to 15             | 44 (23.8)     |
| 16 to 20             | 42 (22.7)     |
| 21 to 25             | 51 (27.6)     |
| 26 or above          | 33 (17.8)     |
| Unidentified         | 2 (1.1)       |
| **Total**            | **185 (100%)**|

With reference to the data shown in Table 2, only 13 of the 185 respondents served in the education field from 6 to 10 years. There were 86 APs taking up the teaching career from 11 to 20 years. The rest of the 86 aspirants had been teaching for 21 years or above.

The 185 aspirants were asked to list the key reasons for attending the AP training program in terms of levels of importance. The score of ‘5’ represents ‘most important’ whereas the score of ‘1’ represents ‘least important’. The findings in the Table 3 below are shown in terms of frequencies (f), percentage (%), mean (M) and standard deviation (S.D.).

Table 3  Reasons for attending the AP program (N=185)

| Reasons                                           | Most important | (5) f (%) | (4) f (%) | (3) f (%) | (2) f (%) | Least important | (1) f (%) | M (S.D.) |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|-----------|----------|
| 1. Wish to lead the school                        |                | 64 (34.6) | 21 (11.4) | 36 (19.5) | 59 (32)   | 5 (2.7)        | 3.46      | (1.309)  |
| 2. Wish to serve the community                    |                | 32 (17.3) | 56 (30.3) | 68 (36.8) | 29 (15.7) | 0 (0)         | 3.49      | (0.955)  |
| 3. Wish to upgrade personal knowledge and competences |          | 88 (48.1) | 26 (14.1) | 18 (9.7)  | 50 (27)   | 3 (1.6)       | 3.83      | (1.309)  |
| 4. Wish to reform the school                      |                | 12 (6.5)  | 80 (43.2) | 59 (31.9) | 31 (16.8) | 3 (1.6)       | 3.38      | (0.876)  |

Table 3 shows the data collected from the current study. In terms of frequencies, the most important reason for attending the AP training program was to ‘upgrade personal knowledge and competences’ (f=88), followed by ‘wishing to lead the school’ (f=64), wishing ‘to serve the community’ (f=32) and ‘to reform the school’ (f=12). In terms of mean scores, ‘wishing to lead the schools’ ranks number 3 (M=3.46) whereas ‘wishing to serve the
community’ gets the second rank (M=3.49). The findings demonstrate that the aspirants gave priority to more intrinsic personal reasons than the extrinsic ones such as leading the school and serving the community. They wanted to satisfy themselves by upgrading their personal knowledge on leadership rather than serving the community and reforming schools. It seems that at the stage of being aspirants, they had little commitment to improving and reforming the school.

5.2 Leadership capacities of aspirants

The APs were also asked whether they agree that they have sufficient competences with regard to 24 items in six core areas of leadership capacities. Four questions were set at a six point scale under each core area, ‘6’ being the highest (strongly agree) and ‘1’ being the lowest (strongly disagree). The meanings of the questions were fully explained clearly to the course participants before they started scoring them.

Table 4 Aspirants’ score for six core areas of leadership capacities (N=185)

| Core areas                                      | Mean score (M) | Grand score (G.S.) |
|------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| 1. Strategic direction and policy environment |                |                    |
| a. School strategic development and planning  | 4.28           | 4.15               |
| b. Paradigm shift and school leadership       | 4.11           |                    |
| c. Ethical leadership in school-based management | 4.04           |                    |
| d. Managing school with various types of leadership | 4.16           |                    |
| 2. Learning, teaching and curriculum          |                |                    |
| a. Instructional and curriculum leadership    | 4.30           | 4.25               |
| b. The developmental strategy of school-based curriculum | 4.27           |                    |
| c. The strategies of school-based assessment  | 4.15           |                    |
| d. The management and development of teaching and learning | 4.29           |                    |
| 3. Teacher professional growth and development |                |                    |
| a. Team building in school                    | 4.38           | 4.29               |
| b. Teacher evaluation                         | 4.38           |                    |
| c. The strategy of teachers’ professional development | 4.32           |                    |
| d. Developing learning organization in school  | 4.07           |                    |
| 4. Staff and resources management             |                |                    |
| a. Financial management in school             | 3.38           | 3.34               |
| b. Human resource management in school        | 3.67           |                    |
| c. The management of school assets            | 3.28           |                    |
| d. School education as an industry            | 3.03           |                    |
| 5. Quality assurance and accountability       |                |                    |
| a. Leadership of quality assurance in school  | 4.26           | 4.26               |
| b. School-based quality assurance and accountability | 4.12           |                    |
| c. The management of external school evaluation | 4.32           |                    |
| d. The indicators of self evaluation and external evaluation | 4.33           |                    |
| 6. External communication and connection to the outside world |            |                    |
| a. Parent and community involvement in school | 3.99           | 3.93               |
| b. The role of the school in the community    | 3.99           |                    |
| c. Collaboration between schools and mass media | 3.70           |                    |
| d. Crisis management                          | 4.02           |                    |

Overall, as judged by the scores attained for the items in the six core areas of leadership capacities, aspirants seemed to have more competence in the area of ‘teacher professional growth and development’ (G.S.=4.29) than that of ‘quality assurance and accountability’ (G.S.=4.26), ‘learning, teaching and curriculum’ (G.S.=4.25), ‘strategic direction and policy environment’ (G.S.=4.15), ‘external communication and connection to the outside world’ (G.S.=3.93), and finally ‘staff and resources management’ (G.S.=3.34). As for the area of ‘strategic direction and policy environment’, the APs demonstrated relatively less competence in employing ‘ethical leadership in school-based management’ (M=4.04), whereas in the leadership area of ‘learning, teaching and curriculum’, they did not score high on ‘the strategies of school-based assessment’ (4.15). They also felt relatively incompetent in ‘school-based quality assurance and accountability’.
It was worth noting that the GSs for the first four items were greater than 4 but those of the last two items were less than 4. The aspirants tended to believe that they were not adequately prepared in the area of ‘staff and resources management’, and ‘external communication’. It was especially obvious that aspirants expressed less competence on the leadership items of ‘making school education into an industry’ (M=3.03), ‘management of school assets’ (M=3.28), ‘financial management’ (M=3.38) and ‘human resources management (M=3.67). In the area of ‘external communication and connection to the outside world’, the APs had relatively less confidence in dealing with mass media (M=3.7), followed, in ascending order, by ‘parent and community involvement’ (M=3.99), ‘the role of school in the community’ (3.99) and ‘crisis management’ (M=4.02). The Pearson Correlation test also demonstrated that there was a significant correlation between these two items. It suggested that aspirants with more years of teaching experiences tended to express more competence with regard to management of school assets (r=0.321, p<0.01).

6. Discussion and conclusion

In spite of its small scale, the study has several significant implications for course providers who wish to improve the quality of training programs for APs as well as for policy makers. The findings suggest relevant strategies for planning continuous professional development of APs in Hong Kong. The study illuminates not only the intentions of a group of aspirants for a principalship but also their feelings concerning their own leadership capacities. In previous years, there was no formal pre-service training before APs took up the position of principal. In examining the results from the data analysis, about one-third of the sampled aspirants had 6 to 15 teaching experiences whereas 60% of them had 16 to 25 years of experience and another one-third possessed 26 years of experience or above. However, data demonstrate that many of them would like to enhance their skills by taking AP training courses. However, they may not wish to be school principals after completing the program. An aspirant made this remark: “I hope to upgrade myself in terms of the leadership knowledge and competence and I won’t think of being a principal at the moment”. On the other hand, the views of APs clearly illustrated that they needed to be equipped with leadership skills in the areas of ‘staff resources management’ and ‘external communication and connection to the outside world’. A lot of APs also found that it was very difficult to deal with mass media. There are a lot of incidents such as student fighting, sexual harassment, corporal punishment occurring in school nowadays. But, both principals and vice principals believe they lack necessary skills in crisis management and in facing those challenging questions asked by reporters. These findings will help refine and improve the focus of the AP training program in future.

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