

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarises some significant findings from a study conducted at a university in the South of Vietnam. The research explored how Vietnamese educational leaders understand educational leadership. The aim of the paper is to raise awareness of educational leadership in higher education among Vietnamese educational leaders, to help improve the quality of leadership work at this university, and other universities throughout the country.

Keywords: educational leadership, educational management, Vietnam higher education.

TÓM TẮT

Lãnh đạo giáo dục trong bối cảnh Việt Nam

Bài báo này tóm tắt vài nội dung chính của một nghiên cứu về lãnh đạo giáo dục được thực hiện tại một trường đại học ở miền Nam Việt Nam. Bài báo tìm hiểu xem các cán bộ lãnh đạo giáo dục ở Việt Nam hiểu như thế nào về công tác lãnh đạo trong giáo dục của mình. Mục đích của bài báo nhằm giúp các cán bộ lãnh đạo nâng cao nhận thức về lãnh đạo giáo dục ở bậc đại học và giúp nâng cao chất lượng công tác lãnh đạo ở trường đại học này nói riêng và ở các trường đại học khác ở Việt Nam nói chung.

Từ khóa: lãnh đạo giáo dục, quản lý giáo dục, giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam.

1. Introduction

The area of educational leadership in higher education is well documented in western literature. However, this area is largely under-researched in Vietnam, and the void has inhibited development of educational leadership in this country. This research investigates ten middle leaders of a university in Vietnam to explore how mid-level leaders at a Vietnamese university understand educational leadership and the differences between educational management and educational leadership. The purpose of this study is to provide these leaders with an understanding of the on-going leadership situation that they are involved with every day, and help them become more aware of ways in which their leadership could be improved. More broadly, the research holds some implications for other Vietnamese universities.

2. Methodology

This study was positioned within the interpretive research paradigm, and used qualitative research approaches. It adopted the case study research method with two

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data collection methods, namely, interviews and an online questionnaire. The findings and discussions in this article come from the interview data.

The participants included ten middle leaders of a university in the South of Vietnam. They were selected according to criteria that included balance in gender, a wide range of age and professional experiences, and representation for different units across the university.

Observing the ethical principle of anonymity, pseudonyms were used for the ten interviewees during the study.

3. Educational leadership

3.1. Definition of leadership

As the term 'leadership' could be defined in accordance with the researchers' individual perspectives, almost as many leadership definitions can be found as there are people who have tried to define it. A review of the leadership literature during the past 30 years provides varying definitions of leadership. For example, Rauch and Behling (1984) defined leadership as "the process of influencing the activities of an organised group toward goal achievement" (p. 46), while Jacobs and Jaques (1990) maintained that leadership is "a process of giving purpose to collective effort, and causing willing effort to be expended to achieve purpose" (p. 281). Most commonly, leadership is described as a process that involves influences, occurs with relationships within groups of people, and includes the achievement of goals or objectives. Yukl (2010) provided the most arguably comprehensive definition of leadership; leadership is "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individuals and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives" (p. 26). In this research study, leadership is defined as a process in which an individual tries to influence the other members of a group or an organisation to work together, in order to accomplish their common goals or objectives.

3.2. Models of educational leadership

A number of leadership models have been addressed in the literature. However, this paper examines the four most relevant models: heroic leadership, distributed leadership, transactional leadership, and transformational leadership.

3.2.1. Heroic leadership

Heroic leadership has been widely practiced in countries which favor power distance and hierarchical thinking. Heroic leadership depends on the belief that the organisation's success is shaped by the leaders' personal characteristics and attributes alone, and that individuals, as heroes, can make a difference, change things and make things better. This model is built on the claim that leadership is about strong individuals with superior qualities as leaders, and others as less able passive objects who have no choice but to follow their leaders. Accordingly, this model emphasises formality and

opportunities for exercising leadership in accordance with hierarchical and structural positions (Oduro, 2004). With all these features, heroic leadership plays a significant role in transitional or developing societies where its features could meet the needs of both leaders and followers. Therefore, heroic leadership is commonly practiced in developing countries that are power-led and heavily hierarchical.

In recent years, heroic leadership has been challenged. Researchers tend to shift from a single focus on a set of personal characteristics of leaders to an emphasis on collective achievement, social networks, and the importance of teamwork and shared responsibilities. This new model is described as the opposite of heroic leadership, and is usually referred to as distributed leadership.

3.2.2. Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership emphasises collectivism rather than individualism. Gronn (2002) describes distributed leadership as a concertive action in which the total is much more important than the sum of its parts.

Distributed leadership is beneficial in many ways. Firstly, it is claimed to have a positive influence on organisational performance. Graetz (2000) indicates distributed leadership provides motivation for change. Secondly, there is evidence that distributed leadership has positive impacts on student performance. For example, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) find that if a big proportion of leadership is distributed to teachers, it will have desirable influences on teacher effectiveness and student involvement. Thirdly, other authors consider distributed leadership as important in capacity-building as a means of sustaining improvement (Hopkins & Jackson, 2003). They argue that distributed leadership with social trust and cohesion is the core of capacity building.

3.2.3. Transactional leadership

Bass (1999) defines transactional leadership as a relationship of exchange between the leader and follower to meet both sides' needs.

Bass (1990) identifies four dimensions in transactional leadership. The first is contingent reward that means exchanges of compliments, increases in pay and promotions for followers' good performance. It might also involve a recommendation for public recognition and honors. The second dimension is management-by-exception in the active form. When a leader applies this approach, he/she actively monitors the followers' work progress and gives timely corrections to help them complete their tasks. Thirdly, a transactional leader might also utilise a management-by-exception approach in the passive form; that is, he/she only makes corrections when something is wrong. The final dimension is laissez-faire when a leader fails to lead and avoids his/her responsibilities.

3.2.4. Transformational leadership

A transformational leader is one who not only recognises his/her subordinates' existing needs but also motivates and satisfies higher needs to develop individually.

Whereas, transactional leaders satisfy their subordinates' self-interest, transformational leaders raise the motivation and morals of their subordinates (Bass, 1999). The transactional leaders emphasise, "what your country can do for you" (Bass, 1999, p. 9); the transformational leaders are concerned with, "what you can do for the country" (p. 9).

Bass (1999) identifies four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealised influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. Firstly, idealised influence means leaders exhibiting confidence, highlighting trust, taking stands on challenges, showing their values, and stressing the importance of the purpose, commitment, and ethical issues of the decisions. The second dimension is inspirational motivation; that is, leaders envision a promising future; set high standards for subordinates; and provide meaning of what needs to be done. Another dimension is intellectual stimulation that involves leaders challenging old assumptions, traditions and beliefs; encouraging innovativeness and creativeness; and stimulating the expression of ideas and reasons. The last dimension is individualised consideration; leaders pay individual attention to their subordinates and inspire developmental growth by coaching and giving advice (Bass, 1999).

In addressing transactional and transformational leadership, it would be helpful to examine the relationship between the two. There have been different ideas about this in the literature. For example, some researchers suggest that transactional and transformational leadership are contrasting ideas. However, there is also evidence of a close correlation between them. Although there are differences between the two approaches, it does not mean they are not related, and in fact, transformational leadership can be considered as a special form of transactional leadership. Also, transformational leadership makes transactional leadership more effective but does not replace it, and the best leaders are those who apply effectively both transformational and transactional leadership (Bass, 1999). In support of this idea, Gardiner (2006) suggest that leaders display both transactional and transformational characteristics but with different frequency and in different situations. Good leaders should know how to combine the appropriate behaviours of transactional and transformational leadership for specific situations (Gardiner, 2006). Moreover, Bass (1990) has emphasised that the application of transactional or transformational approaches should depend on the context. In stable organisations, transactional leadership is usually effective, while in case of crisis, transformational leadership should be utilised.

It is my belief that reviews of literature on transactional leadership and transformational leadership are helpful, because the relationship between these two models is similar to the relationship between management and leadership. In analysing characteristics of transactional leadership and transformational leadership, I noted that transactional leadership is more like managing, while transformational leadership is more like leading. Transactional leaders, like managers, are more concerned about the

process, managerial tasks and efficiency, and “they are more interested in what will work than in what is true” (Bass, 1985, p. 122). Transformational leaders, on the other hand, focus more on substantive ideas and “do the right thing” (leadership) rather than “do things right” (management) as managers do (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 21).

3.3. *Educational leadership versus educational management*

There has been continuing controversy about the two terms of leadership and management. Some researchers consider leading and managing as similar concepts as both involve deciding what needs to be done, building relationships to do it, and making sure that it happens (Yukl, 2010). Others, however, including Bennis and Nanus (1985), argue that leadership and management are completely different and mutually exclusive concepts, and that leadership and management cannot, therefore, be exercised by the same individual. Leaders and managers have different values. Leaders value flexibility, innovation and adaptation, while managers value stability, order and efficiency (Yukl, 2010). In other words, “managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing” (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 21). Moreover, Yukl (2010) identified a number of incompatible factors in the two processes: strong leadership might destroy order and efficiency, and strong management might hinder risk taking and innovation. Interestingly, some writers including Kotter (1990) consider leading and managing as different processes but these writers do not imply that leaders and managers are different categories of people.

In this regard, it would be helpful if Vietnamese educational leaders were aware of the similarities and differences between leadership and management, so that they could apply them effectively. In my opinion, however, whether or not leadership differs from management by definition should not matter too much. What matters more is how the leaders learn to combine the functions of leading and managing effectively in order to achieve the goals and objectives of their organisations. This would also require them to engage in continuous professional learning.

4. Findings of the data

When asked about the differences between leadership and management, the participants indicated that management was specific and involved short-term objectives with many clearly defined steps. Therefore, managers needed to have knowledge and expertise in specific areas and to develop specific measures to manage their job. Leadership, on the contrary, was considered as to be more general with long-term goals and hence required general knowledge and vision. Thao-Huong shared her ideas:

Both leadership and management are needed in my job, but leadership is more general than management. Leadership focuses on strategic objectives for long-term development, and it involves influencing others to work towards the set goals. Therefore, leaders need wide knowledge and good visions. Management is more about short-term objectives. It might involve specific management tasks such as setting the

immediate goals, planning, monitoring, etc. (Thao-Huong, interview data, May 20, 2011)

Bao-Chanh added:

Management concerns staffing, financial management and other management tasks of daily operations. On the other hand, leadership involves directing the subordinates towards the set objectives. (Bao-Chanh, interview data, May 6, 2011)

Tam-Nguyen elaborated:

Management is more specific, and it aims at solving specific problems. Leadership is more general; it is about proposing development objectives. We need both of them to obtain good outcomes. (Tam-Nguyen, interview data, June 23, 2011)

Some participants described leadership as an art of influencing, encouraging and motivating people towards defined goals. It was also reported that management involved maintaining daily operations, or efficiency, while leadership involved creating changes within the unit. Ha-Diep elaborated on her definition of leadership:

Leadership entails great responsibilities at the general level, so it requires the leaders to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of the unit, its surrounding and also the social growing tendencies that might influence the unit. Importantly, the leaders need visions to develop the unit within the next five to ten years, using strategic developmental policies. Therefore, they too need the abilities and skills to be able to propose initiatives and to achieve consensus within the unit. Also, they need consultations from external networks. In addition, leadership implies creating changes- an indicator of ongoing developments of the unit. Equally importantly, leadership means influencing people rather than giving orders to people, so leaders should be careful in how they communicate with their subordinates. (Ha-Diep, interview data, May 13, 2011)

Similarly, Thuy-Hoa stated:

We need both management and leadership to achieve desirable outcomes. However, they are different in that management is more concerned with order, regulations and assignments while leadership is more about influencing and encouraging people to work to obtain the objectives. (Thuy-Hoa, interview data, June 6, 2011)

One of the participants, Xuyen-Phong, emphasised that we manage things, and we lead people. This meant, he explained, that management dealt more with things such as planning, budgeting or monitoring; by contrast, leadership addressed human-related issues such as subordinates' motivation, job satisfaction or communication. Furthermore, Moc-Tuan related management to efficiency and leadership to effectiveness. He also differentiated managers as those who do things right and leaders as those who do the right things. Another participant, Thu-Ha, pointed out that a good

leader was also a good manager, but a good manager was not always a good leader. She said:

Leadership means influencing others to work towards certain goals without forcing them. In my opinion, a good leader is also a good manager, but a good manager is not necessarily a good leader. (Thu-Ha, interview data, May 12, 2011)

It was noted that some of the participants considered themselves more as managers than leaders, although they acknowledged their leadership roles. They defined leaders as people at the top of the university like the President and the three Vice-Presidents, and they saw themselves rather as managers. Moc-Tuan reported:

As far as I am concerned, leaders are people with the highest position in an organisation. For example, at this university, leaders include the President and Vice-Presidents. I do not really think I am a leader, but rather a manager although I am the Head of an office. (Moc-Tuan, interview data, June 23, 2011)

However, all participants agreed that they needed to combine both leadership and management in fulfilling their job responsibilities. For example, Mai-Tuyen said: “To work effectively, we need to combine management and leadership in our job. The more we coordinate the two of them, the better outcomes we can achieve.” Likewise, Thu-Ha commented:

People in higher positions are more likely to be considered as leaders and thus expected to demonstrate more leadership skills; those in middle or junior positions, on the other hand, are more often called managers and hence need to exercise more management skills. It is, however, critical that management and leadership should be combined with each other. Whether you consider yourself as a manager or a leader, you still need to combine management skills and leadership skills in your job to achieve desirable outcomes. (Thu-Ha, interview data, May 12, 2011)

5. Discussions and conclusions

Findings from this study suggested that participants differentiated between leadership and management. Their definitions of these two terms showed that they, like many scholars in the literature, viewed leading and managing as distinct processes. Specifically, they shared similar points of view with Kotter (1990) in that leadership was associated with longer time frames and management with shorter time frames. Furthermore, some participants such as Moc-Tuan were in agreement with Bennis and Nanus (1985) who said that leaders were those who did the right things as opposed to managers who did things right. With an emphasis on leadership, these leaders indicated that leadership involved an influence process, which is an idea widely agreed upon in empirical research (Yukl, 2010). Moreover, as stated by Ha-Diep, leadership was associated with creating changes. Ha-Diep’s claim is supported by Kotter (1990) who argued that “an effective leadership process can help produce the changes necessary to bring a chaotic situation under control” (p. 7). Although the participants saw leading

and management as different, they all agreed that both were needed to achieve desirable outcomes. In fact, Mai-Tuyen and Thu-Ha emphasised that educational leaders needed to exercise both management and leadership in their job to be effective. This finding is consistent with those of other studies in the literature, for example the work of Kotter (1990) and Yukl (2010).

It is surprising and encouraging to learn that the participants appeared to have acquired a comprehensive understanding of leadership and management, despite limited literature in this field in Vietnam. It is believed that these insights have been acquired from reading Western literature. This is a positive indicator of their practices of professional reading for self-improvement.

Evidence from this study also indicated an application of managerial models within leadership at this university. Their concept of leadership is found to be managerial in two respects. Firstly, data showed that some leaders had a managerial conceptualisation in that they considered themselves as managers rather than leaders, although they acknowledged their leadership roles in the organisation. For example, Moc-Tuan claimed that only those at the top of the university organisation such as the Presidents and Vice-Presidents were leaders, and those at the middle level including himself were more like managers. However, this claim is a misconception as top leaders might have gotten to their top positions because of political reasons; in fact, real leaders are found throughout an institution. With this managerial conceptualisation in mind, these participants tended to act more like managers who were concerned about efficiency and about how things got done, rather than like leaders who focused on effectiveness and on what things meant to people. Secondly, their managerial conceptualisation was also revealed by their word choice throughout the data; that is, their use of 'direction/directing' to refer to 'leadership/leading' or 'subordinates' to refer to 'colleagues' in their quotes. Such terms revealed their managerial thinking and that they were functioning as hierarchical managers, although they were assuming leadership positions. This thinking would undoubtedly frame their leadership practices in managerial ways.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that these leaders had good insight into the theoretical differences between leading and managing, and that they had acquired clear and full perceptions of their leading roles. However, their theoretical perceptions were found to contrast with their actual practices in that they were leading by applying a more managerial model in practice, shown, as noted, by their viewing themselves as managers and referring to their colleagues as subordinates. A probable explanation for this contrast is that Vietnamese cultural context in general, and the organisational culture at this university in particular, fosters a managerial hierarchical system that has dominated for centuries. Under this culture, leaders are prepared, assigned and expected to act in accordance with a certain set of beliefs and values and to convey

those imposed and inherited values to staff and students within their institution. This rooted practice of hierarchy in Vietnam, like elsewhere in eastern culture, cannot be changed overnight. In essence, what is being required in making such changes is placing this university at conflict with the wider cultural context and the prevailing socio-political norms of Vietnamese society. With the influence of globalisation as well as western literature, these Vietnamese leaders were becoming more aware of and exposed to the modern and less hierarchical leadership models of the western contexts. This is a positive start. However, it will take time before the Vietnamese hierarchical managerial model can be shifted to a more distributed leadership model.

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