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The Making Of Principals In Singapore Schools

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Abstract

This paper sets out to present findings based on a study of the processes of “principalship-making” in the Singapore education system. Data was gathered from twenty-one primary and secondary school principals, each with headship experiences ranging from one to fifteen years. The paper highlights how the formative years of these principals had a significant impact on “who” they were and how that determined the ways they led schools. Second, based on what principals said about their pre-headship years, the processes of socialisation along the leadership path were evident. Besides the influences of the formation and accession phases, other ways in which principals were “prepared” to take on leadership roles are also raised. Finally, the paper concludes with practical implications of the study on policies related to principalship selection, training, and appointment.

Introduction

The Singapore education system has gained international recognition for its well-established processes and excellent academic achievements. Such remarkable success is reflective of a system that is built upon a strong foundation, one that has evolved over the years in response to changes in the national and global environment.

This success, many might argue, is attributable in large part to a deep belief in and support of high quality leadership. Unlike in the UK and USA (Acker, 1989; Evetts, 1990; 1994; Lyons, 1981), the school leadership selection process in Singapore is generally characterised by a centrally-regulated system that identifies potential principals based on merit (Chua, 1996; Wong, 2000). Career opportunities and upward trajectories of teachers in Singapore are essentially based on their respective principals’ assessment of their performance and potential, although sponsorship and opportunities made available by their principals are just as important to those aspiring to advance their careers (Gronn & Ribbins, 2003, p. 85).

The Context

Historically, Singapore’s educational policies have been defined by its socio-political context (Bush & Chew, 1999; Sharp & Gopinathan, 2002; Teo, 1998). Over the years, schools have undergone several milestone changes, including a shift away from a survival-driven framework since 1965 to that of an efficiency-driven system in the 1980s and 1990s (Yip, Eng & Yap, 1990). At present, the education system has oriented itself towards an ability-driven mission, which is in tandem with the changes in the manpower needs of the nation and that of globalisation and technological advancement (Ministry of Education, 2000; Goh, 2001; Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002).

Notwithstanding the milestone changes, the Singapore education system is a robust one, continually evolving in a gradual yet systematic way over the last forty years. The policies and initiatives that have driven schools over the decades are characterised by incremental refinement and consolidation rather than by a complete overhaul at each phase of major review. In this sense, this study is one that examines the making of principals in the light of a strong and effective system.

In terms of the types of schools in the education system, there are 177 primary and 163 secondary schools respectively (Ministry of Education, 2004). Most of these are government-funded “neighbourhood schools” that are usually located within public housing estates and they provide places mainly for students living in those estates. About one quarter are clan or religious-based government-aided schools under the management of a board of governors. Within this broad category are eight “independent” (Tan, 2003) and twenty-four “autonomous” schools (Ministry of Education, 2003a). In recent years, a system-wide upgrading and improvement programme for schools has led to a number of new ones being built and old buildings replaced by state-of-the-art facilities.

Methodology

The research design for this study was influenced by Gronn and Ribbins’ (1996) approach to the study of educational leadership. A standard interview schedule was adapted to be consistent with the local context. All items in the schedule were covered in each of the interviews with the twenty-one principals. The schedule was deliberately “loosened” in the course of conducting the interviews with each principal to allow him or her to digress. Such digressions were useful in eliciting important information that would not otherwise be forthcoming. Each interview was recorded and transcribed and then returned to the respective respondents for editing.

The Sample

A total of twenty-one principals were interviewed, ten of whom were studied as part of an international project on leadership formation undertaken in 1999 (Chew, Stott, & Boon, 2003; Ribbins, Pashiardis, & Gronn, 2003). The remaining eleven were beginning principals who had been on the job for two years or less at the time of the interviews. The twenty-one principals were selected based on several criteria, namely, background and experience, and their diversity of contextual experience. They also represented a diverse range in their gender, race, age, life experiences and world views. Out of the twenty-one, six were beginning principals from the primary schools, while the rest were heading secondary schools. Seven of the principals were males. On the whole, the gender and racial balance were typical of the situation in the system, with slightly more females and many more Chinese. (To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, only pseudonyms for principals are used for this paper.)

The Formative Years

The formative years refer to the early phase of the leaders’ lives, in which their norms and values, as expressed in terms of moral positions, beliefs and authority are shaped largely

through three key agencies, namely, family, school and reference groups (Gronn, 1999). These agencies shape a prospective leader's personality and character by generating a concept of "self", and a unique style of leadership. It is in the early formative years that they (the leaders) acquire the foundational blocks on which their subsequent leadership values are built.

Findings from this research show that the early influence of the families of principals during their formative years was instrumental in determining how far they could advance in their future careers. As Asian immigrants, their parents held the view that education was a passport to success and achievement in life (Han, 2002; Solomon, 1971) and hence, were prepared to do their utmost to ensure that their children received the best education.

For example, among those principals who had at least five years of headship experience, all recalled that they had astute and farsighted parents, who saw the practical advantage of enrolling them in two primary schools, each offering Chinese or English medium education. Their parents were fully aware of the economic value of equipping their children with a strong foundation in bilingual education, which was introduced by the government in the 1960s. Similarly, principals with less than five years' experience recalled vividly how their parents lived their lives, their words of wisdom, their differing parental styles, and their relationships with significant others in their homes. Parenting styles described by these principals ranged from those that were strict and protective (as in the case of Mrs Lisa) to those that left them on their own in an environment of "healthy neglect" (Miss Cheong and Miss Neo). Others lived in relative deprivation and poverty (Mrs Lily and Mr Greene,) while two principals were appreciative that they were taken care of by their uncle (Mr Greene) and grandfather (Mrs Yoong) when young. Having sisters to grow up with in their early formative years were cited by a few female principals (Miss Wang, Mrs Lisa, Miss Cheong, and Mrs Rose) as memorable and helpful.

Parents played a key role, not only in shaping the world views, but also in moulding the "self" and "leadership character" of these principals. For example, Mr Teo's thoughts on his mission in life first crossed his mind during his conversation with his father when he was a teenager. He said:

When I asked him (my father) what's the purpose of life, his answer was very simple, "To make other people happy". That really got me thinking. That particular statement he made had quite a lot of bearing on a lot of things that I perceive and do because I feel if each of us were to make that a goal in our life, to make other people happy, then the world will be a much nicer place for everyone to live in. So that has to a certain extent become a goal statement in my life, even now as a principal.

The early experiences of principals when they were students had a significant impact on their outlook, philosophy, values and beliefs about school, even many years later (Chew et al., 2003). For example, seven of the principals interviewed were enrolled in convents or mission schools by their parents, as the latter believed that such schools provided a sound education using English as the medium of instruction. The strict discipline instilled by the missionary staff in the school, as well as the desirable attributes they demonstrated in the course of their work, were thought to have a positive impact on their children. One principal recalled her nuns' "dedication to work...they put others first, made sacrifices for others."

In fact, religious convictions were often cited by principals as a guide in their leadership styles and as a source of solace when the going was tough in the initial years. For example, Mrs Lisa shared:

My religion believes in two things: What you sow is what you reap. So your good deeds, good karma, and you try to do good. Secondly, you need to be of benefit to others, help others, have consideration and empathy. That is why when teachers came to see me for time off, I told them to go. It helps if you want people to see you like how you see them as well. I'm afraid of consequences and so I'd better do good things. It sort of gives me the bearing. (Mrs Lisa)

For Miss Kong, besides the psychological support of her mother and sister, she attributed her survival in the first year of heading a new school to her religious faith. She said:

When I was told of the posting, there was no building yet. I was still working at my previous school and had to get the administration of the new school going. Then I was given certain officers who were not in my school yet. A lot of work had to be done; that's why it's overwhelming. When we were in there (the new school), we had to discuss with the architects. We had to plan the building and we came down quite often to see the progress. We literally saw the whole school being built. It was amazing. As I looked back, and being a Christian, I'd say, "Oh, God is very good" because sometimes things were really beyond our control.

In addition, the principals' recollection of their experiences with teachers during the formative years seemed to contribute consistently towards their understanding of what made an "effective teacher" and that in turn shaped their views of what teachers in their schools ought to be like. Some described their teachers as "caring and nurturing" and "fun", while others recalled their teachers' "passion" for the job, their "dedication" and "commitment". The principals remembered teachers who cooked for them at camps and during the vacations (Miss Neo) and those who sent postcards back while on holiday (Mr Greene, Mrs Yoong). Some teachers left a lasting impression on their students through their courage to speak up on behalf of their students. Mr Ang recalled how his class managed to get their teacher to convince the principal to let them take on Additional Mathematics, a subject reserved only for the academically more able students. Still passionate about the subject, he surmised:

I would not have majored in Mathematics if not for that turn of events. That move by the teacher changed our lives forever... The lesson that I learnt here was the importance of good relationship with the teachers and students, and how students could convince the principal and change his mind. (Mr Ang)

Teachers also played an influential role in the career choice of a few of the principals. For example, although Mr Greene's disadvantaged family circumstances were the primary reason for him looking for a job instead of furthering his studies, it was what he observed and experienced as a student that drew him into teaching. He said:

One of the influences in my life was the teachers. I had no second thoughts about getting into teaching...I looked at them (the nuns) and they had come from so far away from home and they were looking after others and making such sacrifices here. They were there guiding and teaching me. I suppose that drew me into teaching also.

In contrast to the ease with which the principals described their experiences with their parents, they had less to say about the impact friends had on their world views. In fact, it was not a priority for the principals to rely on friends who could shape their lives. For example, Mrs Yoong, a beginning principal, observed:

I've got a lot of friends but I wouldn't say they had an impact on me. It was more the social friendship that they offered rather than the influence they had on me.

Similarly, the more experienced principals reported that they tended not to “cling on to friendships and relationships” (Chew et al., 2003, p. 60). They surmised that they relied more on their sense of self-sufficiency and spirit of independence. In general, they were largely opportunistic and superficial in their relationships with others.

To summarise, the family, school and religion all had a significant influence in shaping the principals' world view, basic values and beliefs about education in general, and leadership in specific. The beliefs and values imbued in them in the early formative years in turn exercised considerable influence on how they undertook their roles as school heads.

The Accession Phase

The accession phase refers to a preparatory stage in which possible candidates shape themselves and are shaped for prospective high office (Ribbins et al., 2003). In this phase, aspiring principals rehearse and test their capacity and readiness by comparing themselves with existing office holders and prospective rivals at each stage of their career. As positions become available, potential candidates learn to present and position themselves, and “jockey” to compete with others for preferment. It is in this phase that a person's rate, direction and timing of upward mobility are determined (Ribbins, et al).

Although aspiring teachers may engage in viable strategies to advance their careers during their pre-principalship years, there was no clear evidence that they had planned their careers or their accession at an early stage. Indeed, interviews with the twenty-one principals showed that they attained headship via varied means. Some were given the opportunities to work outside the school system, such as in the MOE headquarters, the National Institute of Education (NIE), and other government ministries, while others rose through the rank and file, progressing from being a teacher to a subject co-ordinator, a head of department and then a vice-principal. For these aspirants, principalship was a natural next stage in their career. For example, Mrs Lisa, a beginning principal, was a classroom teacher and a head of department for fifteen years before assuming the post of a vice-principal. It was only after attending a formal principalship training course that she was appointed as school head for the first time. Others like Mr Teo benefited from working in the private sector while Mr Thomas and Miss Cheong had worked in another government ministry before joining the MOE. For veteran principals like Mrs Soong and Mrs Wong, as well as beginning heads like Miss Wang and Mr Greene, they shared a range of six to ten years of curriculum-related work in the MOE headquarters before their appointments.

Throughout the pre-headship years, the exposure to colleagues, peers and supervisors of different personalities and leadership styles had enriched and prepared the principals for a change in their role when they assumed principalship posts. Having worked with their

peers, colleagues and supervisors, they could make observations and participate as subordinates and leaders. More important was a set of values that they could rely on and put into practice as they advanced along the career ladder as school heads (Blanchard & O'Connor, 1997).

For those who had previous work experience outside the school setting (for example, Mrs Wong, Miss Cheong, Mr Teo, and Mr Thomas), exposure to the nature of work in different organisations and the opportunity to interact with people of diverse personalities, character, abilities, and competencies were useful in their new roles in schools. Upon their return to the headquarters and schools, they could better understand how the system worked at a higher level and were more ready to cultivate their leadership abilities.

As to the reasons they decided to take up the post, most of those interviewed reported that, although they did not directly ask to be principals, they did not object strongly when approached about advancement. Their deciding factors differed, ranging from those who cited altruistic reasons ("It is a responsibility", "I feel like it is a divine appointment", "I want to be in a position where I could influence things", "I want to do meaningful work") to those who believed in their own capability ("I have the making of a principal", "I am able to lead others, able to think and sieve through things", "I believe that I have that extra in me.", "If other people can move on, I can do it also"), and those who viewed the accession to principalship as a natural progression and an opportunity for personal and professional growth ("I was just taken along", "They were grooming me", "aspire to learn, grow and serve in the job").

It is noteworthy that what is presented here are reasons explicitly expressed by the interviewees. This does not preclude the possibility that they might have harboured ambitions to be principals. In the Asian context, it is seen to be inappropriate to put oneself forward for career advancement. In fact, one is expected to be reticent and modest, indicating one's unworthiness, and expressing the view that others are more capable. Interestingly, such false humility – some might call it dishonesty – is not as prevalent as it was a decade ago. Some respondents, for instance, were prepared to say at their career planning interviews that they were ready to head schools or they at least expressed the wish that they would like to be trained for the new posting. Yet, there were those who played down their ambitious drives tended to attribute their accession to MOE's systemic structure that ensured a natural career path progression. Others expressed that they were groomed or persuaded by their previous supervisors, or that they were following the footsteps of their significant others (for example, their sisters). However rationalised, one thing that stood out clearly was that principalship was seen as desirable and prestigious.

The Role Of Formal Training

Out of the twenty-one principals interviewed, all except six received formal full-time training through their participation in the Diploma in Educational Administration (DEA) course or the current Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) at the NIE. The formal courses comprised studies on education leadership and management, and a mentoring attachment to an "effective" school principal for two separate periods. For those who attended the formal training course, they generally benefited from the theoretical knowledge and practical skills. However, it was the opportunity to get to know other

principals-in-training during the course that was found to be invaluable, as networking and collaboration became increasingly important skills that school leaders needed to master. The benefit of networking has also been highlighted in an earlier study by Boon (1992) on the mentor-protégé relationship among secondary school principals in Singapore. It was found that 73% of the protégés continued to maintain contacts with their mentors some years after the attachments to the mentors' schools were over (Boon, 1998, p. 105). Similar studies have also been well documented locally and elsewhere (Barnett, 1990; Bush & Chew, 1999; Chew, Low, & Dixit, 2000; Chong & Low, 1990; 1991; Kram, 1988; Walker & Stott, 1993).

For those who did not undergo formal training, they relied on their existing network of colleagues and mentors, the availability of resources on management and leadership, the support and advice of their family members, and their religious convictions. For example, despite her lack of formal preparation, Mrs Yoong had the advantage of working with her predecessor and was familiar with sufficient numbers of peers and colleagues to be ready to take on her headship role for the first time. Furthermore, she attributed her steadiness and confidence to her strong faith and home support.

The Making Of Principals

Based on the responses of the twenty-one principals, several observations can be made regarding the processes of principalship-making in Singapore. Firstly, the average time taken for aspiring principals to attain headship has become shorter over the years. Unlike the veteran incumbents who had to wait for as long as seventeen to twenty-eight years before principalship came along, the younger ones rose to headship soon after three years of school experience. This is because of a systemic approach undertaken by MOE to enable a faster pace of promotion and career advancement among aspiring teachers. The Education Service Professional Development and Career Plan (Edu-Pac) launched in April 2002 has in place three tracks of career advancement for teachers, namely, the teaching track, the leadership track and the specialist track. Hence the path for teachers who aspire to become principals are clearly mapped out in the system. The plan ensures a smoother transition as older principals retire in the years ahead, thus pre-empting a possible crisis due to the time lag between the availability of potential candidates and the retirement of older principals. For example, in 2002, 28.1% of the principals in the primary and secondary schools were under 45 years of age, while those above 50 years of age formed a majority of 53.5% (Ministry of Education, 1994-2003). Taking into account the rate of retirement of principals in the next few years, there will be a sizeable number of vacancies to be filled.

Besides the sense of urgency in succession planning at a systemic level, it is useful to highlight the issue of "strategy" that aspiring principals are likely to use to hasten the promotion trajectories. Potential principals intentionally or subconsciously negotiate their way to achieve the goal of selection for higher postings (Crow, 1989; Woods, 1983). These authors observed that aspiring leaders form strategies to be identified and selected for principalship, and they tended to indulge in micropolitical ploys to negotiate the next level of the leadership career ladder. They would be consciously motivated (through the use of actions that are intended, calculated and purposive) or unconsciously motivated (though routine actions or habitual actions resulting from socialisation, and actions that

prevent others from exercising influence) (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Galbraith, 1983; Goffman, 1986; Hall, 1972; Hardy, 1987; Kriesberg, 1973; Lukes, 1974).

In somewhat similar ways, aspiring principals in Singapore are likely to use both the formal and informal power networks to achieve their career goals. Systemically, the career development structure provides for teachers with leadership potential to move up the career ladder. Aspiring principals are aware that they have to demonstrate, as soon as they are teachers, their teaching capability and leadership potential. It is through such on-the-job performance, as well as a certain level of trust and collegiality between the incumbent senior official and the potential candidate, that the succession process unfolds.

In appraising the potential candidate, the direct reporting officers' evaluation is of primary consideration, although indirect input from others with whom they have worked, including superintendents or officers at headquarters, is also taken into account. This system may, under certain circumstances, work against aspiring leaders, as they may not necessarily be sponsored by their superiors. This is because their accession depends on the supervisor's ability and willingness to nurture, groom and provide opportunities for learning. It is possible for some supervisors not to put up promising teachers for promotion (based on Mrs Lily's description of her experience when she was a teacher), as it would mean that the schools probably have to release these teachers to serve in other schools. On the other hand, a minority were initially reluctant to accept the post but were persuaded to do so. For example, Mrs Soong, an experienced principal, was approached much earlier to take up a principalship post while working on a project at the Ministry headquarters. Her attempts to delay being a principal were successful only up to a point.

Another common theme observed was that headship was not necessarily a position they aspired to when they first entered the teaching profession. While they were explicit about their reasons for their taking up principalship posts, one could be led to believe that there could be other unspoken driving forces that featured in the minds of aspiring principals at a personal level. For example, it is undeniable that the headship position is a powerful and prestigious one. Accession is a fulfilment of their ego needs and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970). It also gives the opportunity for promotion to the superscale grades and the prospect of earning an attractive salary package. Most educators would admit to this being at least an attractive proposition. As Gronn (1999, p. 25) has observed, the financial reimbursement, status, scope to express one's individuality and identity, and the capacity to realise one's potential, are reasons for the pursuit of a leadership career.

McClelland's theory of motivation (Byrne, 1974; Stewart, 1982) may also serve to explain, in part, the principals' desire to move up the career ladder. It is clear that the drive for achievement, affiliation, and power were implicit in what they said about their career advancement. This is evident in the things principals did in the early days of headship as expressions of their new-found power and influence. For example, one principal who took over a "merged" school (that is, a school formed as a result of a merger of two or three schools of smaller enrolments) seized the opportunity to change the students' uniform within the first year. Others, like Mr Teo, were known to have made swift changes to the physical layout of the administrative office and the staff room as a strategy to manage parents' movements in the school. In the case of Miss Wang, she looked into human resource development issues, gradually re-organising the composition of the middle management team.

Another point of discussion pertains to the best way to prepare potential leaders for principalship, both formally and informally. Based on the views expressed by the beginning principals, the issues of timeliness, relevance, and specificity in training needs may have to be reviewed. For example, they felt that they could be appointed or informed in advance about the school they would be posted to ahead of the formal training. To them, this element of certainty would better prepare them to make things work in their assigned school. In this respect, they felt that trainers could work with principals in their assigned schools in a more meaningful way. That being the case, the structure of the programme and the delivery mode would have to be different from the existing model, one that is contextualised and framed for preparing school leaders for a protracted career span. This in turn calls for a closer partnership between NIE and MOE in the design of the training programme for first year principals.

At another level, one might argue that the idea of matching principals to schools before the formal training period might not be viable, since potential leaders who had been tested and selected ought to be ready to serve in any school environment. Moreover, principalship training is more about cultivating generic leadership capability and thinking than school-specific issues. A principal, it may be argued, should be able to handle uncertainty and head any type of school. Hence, while the experiences of the principals led them to call for a more school-specific approach, when one looks at the career system, with rotation of assignments and varied experiences, that can be problematic.

Furthermore, the question of fit between the individual principals and the schools at any point in time is an ongoing concern. While some may argue that it is desirable to match principals of certain disposition and values to schools that share similar values, this in turn may raise other issues about appointment procedures at a systemic level. The availability of the biographical data of potential leaders, their early childhood experiences and the influences of their families, peers and superiors is useful in providing valuable clues about the values and beliefs of aspiring principals. However, policy-makers may, under certain circumstances, deliberately break the trend of fit to achieve specific objectives.

Conclusion

Despite the increasingly complex and stressful nature of work (Harold, 1988; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Ribbins, 2000; Whan & Thomas, 1996; Whitaker, 2003; Winter & Morgenthal, 2002), filling principalship posts in Singapore schools is not as problematic as in many systems elsewhere (Cooley & Shen, 2000; Evetts, 1994; Portin, 2000; Whitaker, 2003). Aspiring principals in Singapore do not apply for higher positions once they are employed by the Ministry of Education. Instead, a highly regulated and systematic approach of identifying, developing, and grooming teachers with leadership potential is in place. Over the years, MOE has successfully put in place a continual flow of outstanding teachers who have the making of highly effective school leaders.

However, as schools become increasingly diversified and specialised in niche areas, the issue of principal-school fit is likely to gain greater prominence. Increasingly, a rigorous system of "principalship-making" has to be in place to ensure a continuous supply of school leaders who are ready to assume headship roles. It will therefore be in the interest

of policy-makers to consider research on how principals can be better prepared for schools of the future.

Indeed, leadership can no longer be taken in isolation, but has to be more context-based. Given Singapore's unique socio-political context and the inherent constraints, principals have to be aware of their primary roles. They need to be mindful about preparing students to take on the future workforce as well as in nation building and active citizenry. To inculcate sound values and commitment to society and nation, it will be the leadership values of principals that will determine how much has been achieved. Fortunately, in Singapore, the national politico-economic conditions and the MOE's infrastructure provide a sufficiently strong scaffolding to ensure that incumbent and aspiring school leaders are in a good position to not only survive, but also to thrive as they take the helm of Singapore's schools of the future.

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