
Title	An innovative principal who is leading his school to success
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Source	<i>MERA-ERA Joint Conference, Malacca, Malaysia, 1-3 December 1999</i>

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AN INNOVATIVE PRINCIPAL WHO IS LEADING HIS SCHOOL TO SUCCESS

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a research project on how the Principal of a primary school performs his roles and functions that lead to principal and school effectiveness. The school is Gongshang Primary School, Singapore, that is identified by the Ministry of Education as an effective and successful school. One of the facets of the research was aimed at examining the Principal's leadership functions that cover the following 14 areas: school planning, organising activities, instructional leadership, motivation, monitoring, developing the staff, decision making, team building, conflict resolution, delegation, innovation, school culture building, discipline, and public relations. This paper addresses the findings of the Principal's performance in six of the above 14 leadership functions, namely, "instructional leadership", "developing the staff", "team building", "innovation", "school culture building" and "public relations", and discusses the effects of the Principal's leadership behaviour on the school.

Introduction

Purpose of Study

Principal and school effectiveness is determined by the principal's leadership behaviour. Gongshang Primary School has been identified by the Ministry of Education as an effective and successful school. Put into the theoretical base of behavioural leadership, and in practical terms as well, the purpose of this research is, through direct contact with the school leadership, to examine and find out how the Principal, Mr. Wee Fui Twee, performs his roles and functions that lead to principal and school effectiveness.

Research Questions

With the purpose of this study stated above, it is assumed that Gongshang Primary School possesses aspects both in school administration and programmes which are characteristic of an effective school. Hence the research questions include the following—

What has made the school successful? Gongshang Primary School has a long history going back to the early 1920s, but it experienced drastic changes in the middle of the 1980s, especially when it was moved to Tampines New Town and became a new school. Where does the dynamics come from that has helped the school yield outstanding results? What are the characteristics of the school? What are the most important contributors to the success of the school? Although the principal leadership, the staff situation, pupils, and the governmental as well as community support are assumed to be these contributors, evidence is to be drawn from direct contact with the school leadership and from numerous materials collected in the school to verify these assumptions.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

Recent research (e.g. Sergiovanni, 1995) offers a new perspective of school principal leadership that examines principalship as a set of forces available for improving and maintaining quality schooling. These forces include *the technical force*, *the human force*, and *the cultural force*.

According to Sergiovanni, each of the forces can be used by the principal to push the school forward toward effectiveness or to prevent it from being pushed back.

Other researchers (e.g. Hughes, 1994; and Ubben, 1997) have addressed how school principals perform as leaders, and what principals do in effective schools. Put into this theoretical framework, and in practical terms as well, this research is designed to find out how the Principal concerned performs his administrative and instructional leadership.

Data Collection

Data collection was mainly through the school administration and through direct contact with the Principal, Mr. Wee Fui Twee, and the then Vice Principal, Mr. Gan Han Chiang, who have been very generous and supportive in providing the materials needed for data analyses. There are two kinds of data collected from the school: 1. School publications and documents; and 2. Interviews with the Principal and the then Vice Principal with questionnaires and recordings.

With regard to the first kind of data, the major school publications and documents include the following:

- Inside Gongshang: October 1995 (8 pages)
- Inside Gongshang: October 1996 (4 pages)
- Inside Gongshang: April / May Vol. 1/97 (8 pages)
- School Profile Year: 1997 (11 pages)
- Gongshang Primary School work Report 1996 (80 pages)
- Gongshang Primary School Official Opening, 1989 (68 pages)
- Gongshang News, Issue 2. Nov. 1997 (6 pages)
- Gongshang Primary School: School Appraisal Report. Schools Division, Ministry of Education, Singapore. 1990 (16 pages). [CONFIDENTIAL]

Analysis of Data

The Principal's Leadership Functions

The Principal's leadership functions comprise 14 areas, namely, school planning, organising activities, instructional leadership, motivation, monitoring, developing the staff, decision making, team building, conflict resolution, delegation, innovation, school culture building, discipline and public relations. The focus of this paper is on "instructional leadership", "developing the staff", "team building", "innovation", "school culture building" and "public relations". It is noticed that the Principal uses a variety of approaches, techniques, methodologies, and strategies in performing these functions.

Instructional leadership: Supervising/directing the teaching staff in teaching activities for high performance, e.g., giving instructions and guidance to teachers.

Generally, there are three ways in supervising the teaching staff: "close supervision"; "general supervision"; and "laissez-faire". When asked about the way he usually does supervision, the Principal said that he believed in motivation and then supervision. To the Principal, supervision is a must, but there are various ways to do it. Normally the Principal tells a teacher that he is going to observe the teacher's class, and the teacher will prepare the lesson and put on a good show. Mr.

Wee felt that he did not like this way. "The most important thing is to see the results. That is my belief. I am result-oriented. I give a teacher a class, and I trust him. If the class is not doing well, I call in the teacher, and ask what is wrong, and offer my help. This is more effective than classroom observation. I see the whole year's progress and do not bother at what time they are doing what. If in two years the class progresses well, I say the teacher is a good teacher. Supervision is important, but I do it not in a normal way."

In carrying out his task of supervision, the Principal has his way that is identified as providing "direct assistance and development" to help teachers improve instruction, using Glickman's (1998) term. The Principal facilitates one-to-one feedback with the teachers and provides for instructional problem-solving meetings with the teachers concerned to improve instruction. This approach is found efficient, especially for a principal running such a big school as Gongshang Primary.

Developing the staff: Providing support and training opportunities to the staff.

Staff development in Gongshang Primary School is mainly in the form of school-based workshops which enable teachers to improve their teaching skills. Teachers also have opportunities to attend upgrading course outside. The skills and knowledge gained through these workshops and courses are beneficial for themselves as well as for the school.

The Principal also takes staff deployment as a means of developing the staff. He considers deployment in terms of staff development. For instance, if a teacher specialises in science, the Principal puts him in the Science Department. He prepares those who have potential of leadership. When he sees a teacher with potential to be a leader, he will put him as the leader of the teachers. "We must know the teachers very well, know how they work, their qualifications, and their personalities. When I identify a teacher, I talk to him, develop him, and put him in a suitable position. So in Gongshang, when a head is promoted or steps down, we have another to take over and carry on. So developing the staff is a very important thing to do here."

Team building: Encouraging *esprit de corps* among the staff, and building a strong team among the staff who have become co-operative and collaborative team members.

Team spirit is a school value in Gongshang Primary School. The Principal encourages teachers to work together as a team. "If anybody goes on his own, that won't do. There are so many departments in our school. For anything, we put up the school calendar. We must fix everything, and let everybody know his duties. For certain things, I like to get them to work together, and make sure there are no clashes against each other. They may have competition among themselves. But, Gongshang is a school where the staff are encouraged to work together, not individually."

The Principal himself sets a good example in exercising this value of team spirit. For instance, the school has a steering committee, and the members meet very often. When the Principal has a project, he would work together with the committee members to accomplish it.

Innovation: Innovating traditional but obsolete practices, e.g., teaching methods, ECA, etc., in the school.

Every school has its characteristics. When Mr. Wee took over Gongshang, the first traditional game here was basketball. Gongshang Basketball Team was quite well known at that time. It had a very long history. He keeps this. At the National Track and Field Championship this year (1997), the excellent athletes from Gongshang once again brought glory to the school. A school must have something good, but certain things may not be kept.

Regarding teaching methods, the Principal recalled, “model drawing for Mathematics comes to my mind. In the old days, we did not have it, but nowadays, if the teachers want to present the quality and answer more clearly, they resort to model drawing. It is very important. Sometimes we must see the ways to improve existing teaching methods. When I see some new methods really good, I encourage teachers to learn and use them in their classes. I am very open-minded.”

Another important aspect in *innovation*, as is noticed by Mr. Gan, the Vice Principal, who came to Gongshang six years ago, is that although the school maintains very good PSLE results yearly which are well above the national average, the Principal has been leading the staff in working towards quality passes, that is, As and A*s category for English, Mathematics, Science, and Mother Tongue subjects. The expectation for EM1 and EM2 is 100% passes. The Vice Principal commented that “we expect all the P6 pupils in EM1 as well as EM2 to pass. So we tell the teachers that our next step is to work towards quality passes: As and A*s.”

School culture building: Managing changes in the ways of doing things in the school, and in the beliefs, norms, and school values.

Beliefs and cultural values: Philosophically, the Principal believes that the school must give our children an all-rounded education. When the school entered the 1990s, it reached a stage where they were ready to help pupils realise their full potential. Physical, social, moral and aesthetic activities were geared up to achieving that objective. To the Principal, “teaching is a kind of voluntary work. You can do the minimum; and you can do the maximum. As the Principal, I have to motivate the teachers so that they do maximum work.”

Ever since Mr. Wee Fui Twee, the seventh principal of Gongshang Primary, took over the school in 1985 till present time, the school did very well in inheriting traditional Eastern values. The uniform, song and motto of the old school were retained to keep its link with its past. The school leadership has been consciously preserving and promoting the school’s traditions and values that are embodied in the school motto: “Perseverance, Thrift, Honesty, and Respect”.

Since 1987, every year the school organises Mid-Autumn evening as an important school activity. As the society develops, there appear new cultural values. “We can’t stay in the past,” the Principal stressed. “We have to move ahead, and absorb those new values. So we preserve traditional values, like *showing respect to the elderly and learned people, observing discipline* and so on.” Also the Principal emphasises that it is very important for the school to teach pupils to possess the ability to tell right from wrong, and white from black. “I told the pupils today, whatever you do, you have to consider beforehand, whether it is right or wrong to do it. Do it if it is right; or don’t do it at all if it is wrong.” The Principal further explained that “when you want to strive for your interests, you must do it in an appropriate situation. This is a new value. We are living in a society that is full of competition, and it is not easy to distinguish right from wrong because social changes are so rapid, and different from before. It is right today, but it may be wrong tomorrow. So we need to accept new values. I am not a person living in the past.”

Every school is unique, and every school principal, functioning as the school culture shaper, has his or her way of building the school culture. In Gongshang, the Principal does not do it purposely, instead, through the curriculum time and during assembly time, he leads the teaching staff in instilling cultural values in the pupils.

Organisational values: An organisation’s culture is defined as an expression of the combined influence of the organisation’s basic beliefs, values, expectations, an typical patterns of action (Dessler, 1992). Organisational leaders and members originate what is important to them and to the

organisation. Summarising studies conducted by researchers, Dessler provides the following organisational values commonly found as important to American companies: *Performance, fairness, competitiveness, team spirit, family spirit, innovation, entrepreneurship, individual achievement, loyalty, and tradition*. It is assumed that some of these organisational values are relevant to schools in Singapore.

The Principal pointed out that among the above ten values, “*team spirit, performance, and innovation*” are what he emphasises in the school culture building as these three values are relevant to the staff in the school. “When there is team spirit, the staff will work together co-operatively. Staff members have to show high performance, and do their maximum.” The school leadership believes in team concept to establish common directions for meeting problems and generating support for solutions to them. Considerable support comes from the teachers for the many programmes and projects initiated by the school leadership.

The Steering Committee comprising the Principal, Vice-Principal, HODs, and the School Administrator meets regularly to discuss and make decisions, and resolve professional issues relating to teachers, pupils, the school as well as the community. The committee members have the responsibility of planning, implementing, co-ordinating, controlling, and evaluating all the school programmes and activities. A teamwork spirit is encouraged and it fosters professionalism among all members of the teaching staff.

Of the value of *innovation*, the Principal believes in quality. The school’s learning environment and facilities are continuously improved. “Every year there are some changes. Every year we do something new.”

Public relations: Promoting public relations, e.g., relating the school to the community, involving the parents in educating their children; mobilising support from the community for the school.

Since Gongshang Primary School was moved to Tampines New Town in January, 1987, led by Mr. Wee Fui Tzee, the staff endeavoured to continue their good traditions to serve the community in this new environment. They took on a new role in a new neighbourhood with a new group of residents, who had resettled in Tampines. In those early years, Mr. Wee went through the records of the school, and was inspired by the selfless devotion of Mr. Lim Chek Yang, the second principal. He was determined to carry on the good work of his predecessors and to make the school hold in high esteem again as it was in the former community.

The Principal spends a lot of time with the parents. When there is an important thing they come to see the Principal about, he would do his best to work together with them. “I do not do it purposely. In Gongshang, whatever we can do we do it. We have a lot of visitors. This year we have had visitors from Thailand, Japan, and Taiwan. Whenever there is community service, I give full support. I always take school as part of the community. I myself is the Chairman of a Student Care Centre. Some children need care after school. In Gongshang, we started to do this since 1991 quietly, not to publicise it.”

There is a close linkage between Gongshang Primary School and the community. The school has established a close relationship with parents, and gets very strong parental support. This is reflected in the large turn-out of parents at the annual meet-the-parents sessions and in the involvement of parents in the various school events. When addressing the importance of public relations, the principal emphasised that although a successful school life depends a great deal on the efforts of teachers, at the same time, the importance of a good working relationship with parents cannot be undermined (see Gongshang News, Issue 2. Nov. 1997).

Discussion of Results

The Effects of the Principal's Leadership on the School

Working and learning environment: A positive working environment for the staff, which is also a conducive learning environment, has been created in the school that is attractive and appealing to the teachers, pupils, and parents.

Mr. Gan Han Chiang, the then Vice Principal commented that teachers perceive that there is a positive working environment, and conducive for the children, too. It is attractive and appealing for the staff. The working relationship among the Principal, Vice Principal, HODs, and other administrators is very healthy. "We work together as a team for the good of the children. The Principal expresses his philosophy that the children must come first, and this is also conveyed to the whole staff."

The Vice Principal noticed that parents have heard our good discipline and PSLE results, they compare the worksheets that are outstanding with those of the other neighbourhood primary schools, so they ask for a transfer of their children to our school, but we don't have the vacancies to accommodate them. The parents are generally very supportive. Take P4 streaming, for example. We have to meet the parents to explain to them the streaming examinations. The parents do turn up to interact with the teachers to find out the performance of their children.

For these results the Principal explained and offered good reasons. "Parents want to send their children to this school. Some lecturers from NUS (National University of Singapore) also send their children here. I believe in quality. Our learning environment and facilities are continuously improved. Every year there are some changes. Every year we do something new."

Staff's satisfaction and commitment: Commenting on how the staff is satisfied with the Principal's leadership functions, the Vice Principal said that staff members are satisfied, and they are happy with the Principal's leadership quality, and with the climate of the school. "The Principal has good PR. We don't have many teachers asking for transfer to other schools, about one or two a year only. The interpersonal staff relationship is very good."

With regard to the staff's commitment to teaching as the result of the Principal's leadership, the Vice Principal expressed that the staff find working in the school is rewarding. "The Principal tells them they must be prepared for the heavy workload. They do work very hard. Our good results are seen in SA1, SA2, P4 streaming, PSLE and also in the number of our P3 children who are selected for the Gifted Education Programme (GEP). This year there are 51 P3 children selected to sit for the GEP tests. This is a record number so far. The results are testimony of the teachers' dedication and commitment." The Principal is also satisfied to notice that the teachers are very committed to teaching. "I feel it, and parents say so, too. I don't need fund fair because parents are very supportive although they are not rich. They have very good impression of our school."

School curriculum and academic performance: As the results of the Principal's performance in the above function areas, the school's curriculum has been strengthened and the pupils' academic performance has been boosted, to a notable extent.

In recent years, the pupils in Gongshang Primary School have performed well above expectations of the school and above the national average at the PSLE. In 1996, 416 of Primary 6 pupils sat for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), and 96.2% were placed in secondary schools. This percentage was above the National Average of 95.5%. The 1996 PSLE results showed that the P6 EM1 and EM2 pupils scored 100% passes, and 279 pupils (82.3%) were channelled to the

Special and Express Course, and 61 out of 77 P6 EM3 pupils (79.2%) were placed in the Normal Technical Course. This year (1997), the pupils continue to perform excellently, and the PSLE results can be seen in Appendix 4: Placement of Pupils after PSLE and PSLE Results 1997.

In terms of quality passes in A* /A category, the school has outstanding achievements which are shown in the Gongshang Primary School Work Report 1996 with the percentages of the national averages shown in the brackets for comparisons-- a) English Language: 52.2% (44.2%); b) Mathematics: 51.9% (42.7%); c) Science: 47.5% (44.7%); d) Chinese Language: 89.7% (79.8%); and e) Malay Language: 98.2% (77.3%).

With these academic performance, the Vice Principal pointed out that the Principal had been doing very well and was promoted from SEO1 to SEO1A in the last promotion exercise, which was in recognition of his good performance. The Principal, however, set a higher target for himself as well as for the school: "I am not satisfied with what we have achieved. We can do better. I feel that whatever targets we have reached, we should look ahead. For example, we have reached 90% passes this year, but we want to aim at 92% next year. Whatever we do, we cannot feel that we are satisfied and that is enough."

Conclusions

The importance of the principal and the difference the principal makes to the school have been shown in numerous studies carried out by researchers (e.g. Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; and Andrews & Soder, 1987). The latest research on the principal's role undertaken by Ubben and Hughes (1997) shows that schools really can make a difference in the achievement levels of students, but a school is most often only as good or bad, as creative or sterile, as the person who serves as the principal of the school.

Researchers evaluate leadership effectiveness in terms of the results or effects of the leader's actions on their followers or on their organisations. The most commonly used measure of leader effectiveness is the extent to which the leader's organisation performs its task successfully and attains its goals.

When asked about whether the school visions were realised and the schools goals reached, Mr. Wee expressed that "I myself have a target... Of the school vision, we need to have principles and ideals. As a principal, when you take over a school, you need to visualise what the school will look like in the years ahead. ... we want the pupils to have excellent academic performance, good behaviour, good ECA records, and right values. These are the overall visions of the school". Supported by ample evidence, it is fair to comment that under the strong leadership of Mr. Wee, the staff are making concerted efforts in their teaching, and the pupils performed remarkably well both in their studies and in ECA records, and have been instilled right values. With the dedicated staff, the enthusiastic School Advisory Committee (SAC), and supportive parents, the school has been making steady progress toward the realisation of the overall school visions and goals.

In summary, the Principal is found to have performed his roles and functions very effectively. As the then Vice Principal put it, "the Principal is a very effective leader. He is caring and supportive to the teachers. Dynamism is his greatest assets. He is very dynamic." As for the Principal, he commented that "I have a sense of satisfaction. My teachers are happy, and the pupils are happy. They have high performance. I see that my visions have been almost realised, but not reached the top yet. There are still long miles to go." The Principal has been working in Gongshang Primary School for 11 years, and he will continue to strive to the utmost to help the school achieve its mission.

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