Emerging Principalship Collaborative Style: Towards Research in Mentoring

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Introduction

An earlier exploratory study (Chong, 1991) suggests that a collaborative style of principalship is expected to emerge from the mentoring process. This paper highlights aspects of the environment of school management in Singapore which are beginning to support this emerging style that future principals are learning to adopt. It also identifies some possible areas for further research. Implications for policy and management are discussed. Mentoring episodes in Singapore could provide a unique opportunity for research that explicate a theory of morphogenesis.

What is Mentoring?

Mentoring comes from the name of a servant of Ulysses in Homer’s The Odyssey. This servant, named “Mentor”, was entrusted with the tutelage and care of Ulysses’ young son Telemachus, who became Mentor’s protégé. The word mentor then took on the meaning of “trusted counsellor, friend or guide”. Over the last 10 to 15 years there has been growing interest in the use of mentoring in developing people in organisations, and the word mentor has been assigned various meanings depending on its context. Mentor may refer to an experienced adult who befriends and guides a less experienced adult, or a wise advisor who manages, nurtures, encourages, and teaches organisational responsibility. Mentoring has been used to indicate a broad range of developmental relationships between juniors and seniors, and among peers.

Since 1984, the mentoring process has been incorporated into the Diploma in Educational Administration [DEA] programme at the National Institute of Education, Singapore as a device for the education of potential school principals. In the full-time DEA programme of one academic year, all participants have to undergo an eight-week practicum. During these eight weeks, each participant is attached to a specially selected high performing principal who serves as his/her mentor. The mentor aims to provide an effective role model for the participants, and to help the participant/protégé practise and gain experience in the use of executive skills (Low, Chong, Leong, and Walker, 1990) relevant to the “real-life” principal’s job. A more detailed review of mentoring in general, and mentoring within the DEA programme in particular is found in Chong, Low, and Walker (1989), a summary of which is also featured in Marquardt and Engel (1993).
What is the Emerging Principalship Style?

In studies of mentoring, the focus has been on benefits accruing to individual mentor or protégé. There is, however, no study that examines benefits to the system. Although writers, whose interest is in the problem of executive succession and sponsorship in organisations, may not be writing specifically on mentoring, one could suggest the possibility of using mentoring in similar situations. In order to better understand the benefit of mentoring to the system, a content analysis of responses from 36 mentors associated with the DEA programme was done. These respondents were given an open-ended question which was one of the items in the survey form used to collect data related to mentoring used in the DEA programme in 1989. The question reads:

Do you feel the Singapore Educational System as a whole has benefited from the Mentor/Protégé programme? Yes/No

Please explain.

Details of this exploratory study have been reported by Chong (1991). This study suggests that a new style of principalship is emerging. Five characteristics associated with this new style of principalship have been identified in this study, and they are listed below:

(1) Principals continue learning on the job. They can learn from experience and from one another through interactions with other principals, as well as through formal training programmes conducted by senior principals.

(2) Principals involve themselves in the development of future principals. They are aware of the opportunity to influence future principals, especially those they have mentored and to whom they have transferred their knowledge and skills.

(3) Principals lead and manage their schools competently and confidently. They see themselves working with other principals in support of one another for the effective management of schools.

(4) Principals continue to improve the status of principalship by the image they project. Professionalism of principalship is given emphasis.

(5) Principals put theories of school management into practice. They see themselves as expert practitioners who can complement the role of the management educators by their ability to demonstrate how theory works.

These five characteristics of the new style of principalship illustrate that principals collaborate with one another, with future principals, and with management educators in their work. The phenomenon of collaboration is as common as competition in the world of organisations. Thus a study of collaboration can contribute to the theory and practice of managing organisations (Morgan, 1986). Collaboration can also be an important variable in organisation-environment relationships (Astley, 1984).

Possible Research Areas

Four research areas can be identified for further study. They are altruistic relationships, collaborative strategies, systemic linkages, and organisation development techniques.

(1) For mentoring to work, both mentor and protégé must be involved in collaborative learning. They help each other to learn in the workplace. In mutual helping, each person wants the other person to achieve the level of learning that he or she wants for himself or herself. This relationship may be labelled as altruistic. Such a notion of human relationship need not be contrary to self-interest. It builds on self-interest, and one could suggest a paradigm that relates self-interest to a moral basis (Etzioni, 1988). The mentors and protégés have been found
to reap mutual benefits from this altruistic relationship according to studies in mentoring (Low, 1991; Walker, 1991).

(2) With the growing importance of adapting to a rapidly changing environment in a knowledge-based society (Drucker, 1992), organisations are viewed as learning organisations (Senge, 1990). Such organisations continually enhance their capacity to be creative in the context of their shared environments. A mentoring process established in such a system encourages the creation of shared futures. The notion of the creation of shared futures has been highlighted as a focus of the ecological perspective of organisational analysis (Morgan, 1986). A study of mentoring is likely to give important insights into the workings of collaborative strategies used in learning organisations.

(3) On the systems level, globalisation has gained interest in recent years. Organisations are viewed as linked into global networks (Porter, 1985), which are likely to wield more power than traditional forms (e.g., professional associations, interlocking directorships, multinationals). Mentoring can be viewed as a possible means for generating the process of network-building. Ways for studying network structures have been developed (Burt and Minor, 1983). A study of the introduction of mentoring episodes system-wide can give insights into a theory of morphogenesis or genesis of structures (Buckley, 1967) of global networks.

(4) Given the suggestion that mentoring can bring about new organisational structures and new ways of viewing human relationships in the workplace, mentoring can be viewed as an instrument to bring about organisational change. An organisational change approach requires that the requisite organisational conditions for an effective mentoring process must be studied (Kram, 1987). This is in line with the concept that organisation development is a “process for improving processes” (Vaill, 1989). A study of the instrumental use of mentoring episodes organised in the workplace to achieve specific organisational purposes can yield better understanding of organisation development techniques.

A theory of morphogenesis as proposed by Buckley (1967) has been classified as an integrative theory which attempts to explain the way in which societies change and elaborate their basic structures. It aims at explaining how systems emerge from a network of interaction among individuals. A study of mentoring is expected to give insights into the morphogenic process. The four areas of research identified above presume that mentor-protégé relationships as altruistic relationships require and encourage new ways of viewing human relationships in the workplace among participants involved in the mentoring process. From the process of interaction within mentoring, a collaborative norm of behaviour can emerge in the system, as mentors have suggested in an exploratory study mentioned earlier in this paper. Organisational structures at any particular time are outcomes of such process of interaction. Although Buckley has restored a critical focus on the processual element to the notion of system, there is still a need for systematic case studies of this processual element. The mentoring episodes may provide such an opportunity for case study.

Environment for Collaborative Principalship in Singapore

Although a collaborative style of principalship is expected by the mentors to emerge in Singapore, one may wonder whether the environment of school management supports such a style. The possibility of doing any study in the four proposed areas presupposes that collaboration among school executives is a growing phenomenon in Singapore. Four aspects of the environment are described below to suggest that they have emerged over the previous decade to support a collaborative style
of principalship. This suggests also that collaboration, and thus a study of it in relation to mentoring, is meaningful in the Singapore context.

**Emerging job demands**

Over the previous quarter of a century, the principal’s job has evolved from the “ground contact and executive agent of the Ministry” to the “chief executive officer” of the school. Wee and Chong (1990) have reviewed school management over this period of time and have identified three phases through which the school management system has evolved. In the first phase, the principal performed the role of the supervisor of routine tasks. Increasing complexity in the environment of school management led to the second phase in which the principal took on the role of the manager of work performance. In the third phase the principal was entrusted with the role of the professional leader. Principals are expected to lead their teachers and to be held increasingly accountable to the public, especially the parents. Schools are also periodically appraised by teams of inspectors from the Ministry of Education. Performance of their pupils in the various public examinations is monitored closely. There is public interest in the ranking of schools by pupil performance in public examinations. Parents are meeting with the principals in greater numbers. As principals are expected to be chief executive officers of their schools, they have become more concerned with creating school identities for the purpose of marketing, and have a tendency to organise schools that can compete with others. Schools are beginning to collaborate in small clusters to mount staff development programmes and to share resources. They are beginning to feel the impact of the external environment on their job. Throughout the eighties, principals began showing increasing concern for the performance of the role of the professional leader as public pressure for performance mounted, and professional associations involving principals were revitalised or formed for mutual support and collaborative professional development (Wee and Chong, 1990). In a rapidly changing environment, principals may be better served by collaborative structures that can help them meet the challenges from environmental demands. The mentoring programme for potential principals is one such structure. Changing work demands on executives of organisations has been debated vigorously among scholars recently (Kanter, 1989; Drucker, 1992), and studies of elaboration of collaborative structures could contribute meaningfully to this debate.

**Emerging leadership role**

In the eighties, an increasing number of research studies in the area of school management was done by principals admitted to the Master of Education programme. Chong and Low (1991) reviewed this body of research and suggested that the role of the professional leader for principals had been emerging. In this role, six key tasks had been identified. These emerging key tasks are:

(1) Provide feedback to teachers on their instructional strategies based on classroom supervision.

(2) Induct new teachers into the school system.

(3) Discuss with teachers new teaching strategies.

(4) Discuss with staff the implementation strategies for new policies (eg moral education, streaming, heads of departments scheme).

(5) Introduce alternative or new strategies to upgrade school performance.

(6) Organise experimental educational projects to promote innovation and change.

These tasks suggest that the principal’s job as the chief executive officer of the school has been enlarged and it has gone beyond the usual tactical, transactional and immediate management tasks. In the emerging role of the
professional leader, the principal is likely to be fostering creativity and innovativeness in the school organisation. In doing this, sharing of ideas, problems, and solutions among people in collaborative enterprises is a useful stance to take, an attitude fostered in the mentoring programme for potential principals. Studying the mentoring process for fostering continual work improvement through learning from others in the workplace is meaningful, since the workplace is becoming a critical place for learning.

Emerging school autonomy

Leong (1991) reported on a study entitled “The role of parents and schooling in the year 2000”. Major trends affecting schooling were identified by delphi panel members associated with the study. The most important trend identified is:

Principal and vice-principal will be given greater autonomy in setting the tone and character of their schools without being restricted by Ministry of Education directives.

Autonomy in school management has been emerging over the previous decade. In the early eighties, the Ministry of Education declared its intention to decentralise the management of schools. Since then, schools have been reorganised to give principals trained heads of departments to form their school management teams. In 1987, a new and experimental pilot project of independent schools was launched. This pilot project was expected to provide an indication of the possibilities and limits of decentralisation of school management, thus making it possible for all schools to run like independent schools in the future. Setting the tone and character of the school, creating a management team, and developing independent-like schools takes time and requires consensus-building among staff members, parents, and alumni. Schools are no longer seen as isolated from their environments. Consensus on the tone and character of individual schools among staff members, parents, and alumni is now recognised as an important part of school management. Collaboration between schools and their environments in networks is getting more attention in school management, and probing its nature is useful for both practice and theory.

Emerging executive norm

Since 1984, principals-to-be have received formal executive education through the Diploma in Educational Administration programme as a matter of public policy. Participants learn 10 executive skills (Low, Chong, Leong and Walker, 1990), 14 principalship tasks (Chong and Low, 1991), and six leadership behaviours (Chong, Low and Walker, 1989) within a framework of five management functions of planning, organising, staffing, leading, and controlling. In this programme, theory and practice are normed experientially by future principals through the mentoring process. Beginning in 1991, the Ministry of Education required that performance of all principals and vice-principals be appraised annually according to set criteria in an appraisal form designed specially for the purpose. This set of criteria is different from the previously used undifferentiated common set of criteria. Over time, through formal learning and appraisal programmes, principals are likely to learn the norm of principalship as chief executive officers and professional leaders. Norming requires principals to collaborate in setting and projecting standards among themselves to meet the expectations of the external environment. All potential principals who have participated in the mentoring programme of the DEA have the experience and knowledge of such collaborative norming. As more of these potential principals become principals of schools, collaborative norming could be an important concept in the study of leadership.

Implications for Policy and Management in Singapore

In Singapore, human resource development is being used as a policy instrument in bringing about national and economic development (The
Strategic Economic Plan 1991). The four research areas identified above can help to create concepts and theories that could reduce the bluntness of the policy instrument. Singapore requires that the level of skills and knowledge for her people at the workplace be lifted to meet global economic and technological changes. This can be achieved through judicious use of human resource development policies. Learning of higher level or new skills and knowledge is supported by incentives to learn and to transfer what is learned to the workplace. Human resource development policy is most blunt when used to cut through existing structures to allow the transfer of what is learned into the workplace. Executives and managers of all organisations, including schools, have to be encouraged to take on new ways of thinking about and doing their work (Drucker, 1992) that allow for the effective transfer of knowhow into their organisations through collaboration. Research that helps executives and managers think about their work in such new ways is likely to contribute to innovations in the workplace in Singapore.

Research in mentoring can help executives and managers understand better altruistic relationships that do not require them to forgo self-interest and the bottom line. Human resource development at the workplace can then do more than merely set up corporate classrooms that seem to be far removed from the corporate concern for the bottom line and the national concern for economic growth. Executives and managers can be helped to understand and use collaborative strategies to achieve mutual goals among members of the organisation, and to build linkages among a large number of organisations at a global level to benefit from Singapore’s comparative advantage. The development and use of better organisational development techniques can bring about more effective applications of policy instruments.

**Conclusion**

This paper suggests that mentoring episodes at the systems level can bring about structural changes. Further research is needed and four research areas have been suggested. These four areas of research can contribute insights to help better understanding of a theory of morphogenesis. Such research in mentoring can have ramifications beyond the confines of management education for school executives.

**REFERENCES**


