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Leadership of An Effective Principal: A Taiwan's Case Study

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative case study was conducted to explore how an effective principal led an elementary school. Observation, interview and document analysis were used to collect data. The findings suggested that the principal possessed good personalities which helped him create harmonious school climate. Humanistic leadership was shown on the principal.

INTRODUCTION

During these recent years, claims for educational reforms have been prevalent in Taiwan's society. Several civil organizations were formed to address their concerns for school quality. Besides, the Ministry of Education and the Council on Education Reform affiliated to Executive Yuan proposed "Education Report in the Republic of China" (Ministry of Education, 1995) and "Report on Education Reforms" (Council on Education Reform, 1996) respectively, when encountering peoples' eagerness for educational change. However, school teachers and administrators feel disturbed and confused concerning which way to go when they face these successive proposals for school innovations.

Examining the trends of international educational reforms, one may find that the key challenge is to find a balance between centralization for quality control, and decentralization for school-based improvement efforts (OECD, 1989). In Western countries, the approach of decentralization has been to let schools take more responsibilities for their own management. "Site-based management" or "restructuring" in the USA; "local management of schools" in the UK and "self-managing schools" in Australia are different labels with similar concept for decentralization (Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994). The approach utilized in western countries are just like the claim for deregulation in today's

society of Taiwan. It is not a sufficient and necessary condition for the promotion of educational quality, instead, it only provides a context conducive to school innovations.

As a matter of fact, policy can not mandate what happens, so the sole reliance on top-down change usually results in failures. Now, the framework for educational reforms has been proposed by the government in Taiwan, then the following step is to make the school as the center of change (Pan, & Yu, 1999).

During these years, teachers seem to be in a passive position when facing the reform proposals. They feel that they are the subjects to be reformed rather than being the change agents. The approach to educational change now should be school-based. The school needs to make change every teacher's business and view change as an opportunity instead of a burden (Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994). Only recognizing the school as the center of change, the goal of self-renewing school becomes possible to be accomplished.

Within such a kind of social context, I tried to use an elementary school as a field to investigate how an effective principal leads a school. And hopefully the results will be heuristic for schools leading to change and improvement.

RELATED LITERATURE

School Effectiveness Research

The development of school effectiveness area may be traced back to the late 1960s. *The Equality of Educational Opportunity Report* conducted in 1966 by James Coleman and his colleagues is the landmark study in this area. Coleman et al. (1966) indicated that students' achievement depended more on their family background than on the school characteristics and resources measured in the study. However, the finding was misinterpreted that "schools do not make a difference" (Cohen, 1982), which resulted in pessimistic idea about education. In reaction against the *Coleman Report*, studies were done in order to prove that schools do have impact on students' achievement.

In the late 1970s, a few people tried to pull together studies suggesting that some schools could help urban poor children achieve at levels more comparable to those in more affluent, suburban areas. This new research led to the effective schools movement in the United States (Firestone, 1991). Studies

published by Brookover, Beady, Flood, & Schweitzer (1979) and Edmonds (1979) in the United States and by Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston (1979) in the United Kingdom are the early works on school effectiveness. Following the studies of the two above countries, Israel and the Netherlands started their investigations in this area. And only very recently, other countries in Europe (for example, Sweden and Norway) and countries in Eastern hemisphere (for example, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Taiwan) began engaged in effective issues (Creemers, 1996).

It has been more than thirty years that researchers have been working on the area of school effectiveness. Some important findings concerning the characteristics of effective schools, no matter from empirical studies or review papers, have been proposed. The findings are more or less the same as the Edmonds' (1978) "five-factor theory": (1) emphasis on student acquisition of basic skills; (2) high expectations for students; (3) strong administrative leadership; (4) frequent monitoring of student progress; (5) orderly climate conducive to learning.

From the more recent reviews by Levine and Lozotte (1990) and Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore (1995), we still can see similar characteristics of effective schools pointed out. The detailed analysis of the two works is listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Characteristics of Effective Schools in Two Studies

Levine & Lozotte (1990)	Sammons et al. (1995)
Productive climate and culture	Shared vision and goals A learning environment Positive reinforcement
Focus on central learning skills	Concentration on teaching and learning
Appropriate monitoring	Monitoring progress
Practiced-oriented staff development	A learning organization
Outstanding leadership	Professional leadership

Salient parent involvement	Home-school partnership
Effective instructional arrangement	Purposeful teaching
High expectation	High expectations
	Pupil rights and responsibilities

Note: Adapted from "The foundations of educational effectiveness," by J. Scheerens and R. Bosker, 1997, p. 156.

Principalship in Effective Schools

Among the characteristics of effective schools in relevant literature, leadership could be found as a key factor. And the early studies of school effectiveness suggested the importance of strong instructional leadership by the principal. The job for the principal is to set criteria and procedures for evaluating teachers, observing classrooms regularly, and to discuss with teachers for improving classroom practices, and to reward teachers for their excellent teaching. Monitoring and directing the affairs of teaching and learning are essential to the principal's role (Sergiovanni, 1995). However, this finding is not applicable to different school contexts, including different countries. For example, instructional leadership was not found as a significant determinant of effective school in the Netherlands (Creemers, 1996). Besides, no matter informed by the actual situation, empirical studies or the contingency theory of leadership, we know that the principal's leadership style need to be suited for the organizational context. A task-oriented and authoritative principal may be good in schools where teachers are lacking in commitment or poorly trained but not good in schools where teachers are highly competent and committed.

Investigating the studies of principalship in effective schools, Blase, Blase, Anderson & Dungan (1995) argued that the control perspective has dominated research of school leadership for decades, partly because it has been fostered by the school-effective literature and related approach to school improvement. When we want to jump out of the traditional control perspective that school effective studies employed, some other perspective need to be brought in. Nowadays, more scholars explored the issue of school culture (e.g., Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1992, 1995), cultural perspective may provide an alternative avenue for examining school principalship.

METHODS

Qualitative Case Study

Focusing on “discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied” (Merriam, 1988, p. 3), a qualitative case study became the choice of this research design. Based on interpretive paradigm, I and my assistant went to the school site observing how a school operated. We talked to teachers, administrators, parent representatives and even the school guards. We sat in the staff meetings, administrative meetings, and grade teachers’ meetings. Pseudonyms are used in this paper referring to the school and relevant persons involved in the study. Several methods were utilized to collect the data we needed.

Document Analysis. Important documents were collected for analysis, such as the historical descriptions of Wen School, the introduction of the school administration, the activities plans, minutes of administrative meetings, minutes of staff meetings, and minutes of grade teachers’ meetings.

Observation. Two to three days from November, 1995 to June, 1996 were spent in Wen School for observation. Researcher’s role kept changing during the research process. My assistant increased his involvement as the time proceeded. He went to field trips helping teachers take care of children and helped teachers set up a room for meeting after staying in the field for weeks.

Interview. Different forms of interview were used. Some were formal; some were informal. Some were semi-structured and some were unstructured. Since we stayed in the school for a long period of time, asking questions or exchanging ideas with participants usually occurred in the process of observation. In order to explore questions more thoroughly and systematically, we designed a list of interview questions for directors of each administrative offices to answer. Besides, some in-depth interviews were also conducted for understanding generally about how the school functioned under the leadership of Principal Wang.

The Selection of Participating School

Using the experience of being involved in the International School Effectiveness Research Programme as a reference (Lee, Pan & Schaffer, 1995), the reputational criteria was utilized to identify an effective school in Taipei. Five administrators in Taipei Education Bureau, who know very well about Taipei schools' functioning, each nominated seven to ten effective schools. After computing the frequencies of each school being nominated, Wen Elementary ranked as the first place was picked for this study.

Principal Wang in Wen Elementary happened to be a person I knew before. We knew each other from an involvement in a project aiming at promotion of the quality of teaching and assessment in Taipei schools. So, it is not difficult to obtain Wang's agreement participating in this study.

In a warm afternoon, I initiated a meeting in Wen Elementary for explaining my research purposes. I sat on the sofa in Wang's office, where Wang and his directors from each administrative offices all sat around me. I introduced myself and my assistant to the school staff and illustrated that we would be "learners" going to the school for research. I also expressed explicitly what kind of support we needed from them. The communication process went smoothly and we got warm welcome from the school.

Data Management and Analysis

Field notes were taken when we went to the field. All the formal interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Each of the field notes and interviews were initially coded to determine emerging themes and patterns, then were developed into categories. Although the job of data collection was mainly responsible by my assistant, we discussed the data almost every week during the period of study, which may further confirm the categories we got for analysis.

THE SCHOOL

Located in the northeastern area of Taipei city, Wen Elementary is a school with forty years. The wall surrounds school is clearly seen from the main road, whereas the school entrance gate situated in a smaller street is not so obvious, which was almost missed when I drove to the school for the first time.

From 7:30 AM, the school started filled up by the coming pupils. Usually, pupils were required to go to their own classroom before 8:00 AM where they were allowed to do whatever they liked but not making noises. Some classrooms had voluntary parents reading stories. Then a school morning gathering took place around 8:00-8:25, followed by a 20-minute lesson on ethical or health education. The schedule for a full day had 40-minute classes beginning at 8:50 AM and lasting until 3:50 PM with ten minute breaks interspersed through the day, whereas classes ended at 12:00 PM for a half day.

Under the national framework of school system--six-year elementary education and three-year junior high school, Wen Elementary serves children from 6 to 12 years old. Besides, it also housed three classes of kindergartners aged 5 years old. Wen Elementary had 69 classes, 2,312 pupils and 128 staff in 1995-1996 school year. Every class had approximate 32 to 34 pupils. This figure reflects the on-going policy for educational reform during these recent years concerning reducing school and class size.

Recruiting youngsters mostly from middle-class neighborhood, Wen Elementary had been keeping a good reputation. Teachers' leaving rate is low. Most teachers in the school worked more than ten years. Wang went to Wen Elementary just for two years when I conducted this study there. The administrators of Taipei Education Bureau nominated Wen Elementary as an effective school were mainly because of Principal Wang. He was enthusiastic, responsible and cooperative in their eyes. Wang always made the school "move" wherever he went, which was the administrator's impression of him. Although Wen Elementary already had a good reputation before Wang served there, Wang did create Wen Elementary a different image.

Wen Elementary has a standard structure of administration. Under the principal, there were six office directors in charge of academic affairs, student affairs, counselling, general affairs, personnel and accounting respectively. Three to four sections were set up in each office except Personnel Office and Accounting Office.

In order to keep school operating, it was regulated that every school needs to hold staff meeting once per semester, hold administrative meetings routinely and organize subject teaching meeting and grade teachers meetings one time per month in principle. When we went to the field, a number of meetings held were observed.

In addition to the formal curriculum, we found that some good extracurricular activities

implemented in Wen Elementary, such as boys scout, girl scouts, and teams of balls, Judo, Karate and swimming. Intervisitation of schools were also the versatile activities going on in Wen. A school from Kimmen, an island western to Taiwan, and a school from Japan had visited Wen when we observed there.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Literature of leadership indicates that personal traits and leading behaviors were the earlier foci of investigation. Since 1960s, contingency theory has become dominant in the area of educational administration . Using the perspective of contingency theory, I attempt to explore what kind of personal characteristics and leadership styles Principal Wang had within such a context of Wen Elementary, which enabled Wen rated as an effective school. In addition, cultural perspective penetrates in the text providing detailed portrait of Wang's leadership.

Personal Characteristics

Smiling face seemed to be Wang's mark. When I first met him, his smiling face impressed me pretty much. During the period of study, we always saw his smile. Wang was a nice and friendly person. He sometimes chatted with teachers humorously. Even pupils may feel at ease to talk to him, which is not so common in Taiwan's schools. Since most schools with the size of more than sixty classes, the principal represents the top position of the school hierarchy.

In order to strengthen pupils' abilities of self-expression, Wen Elementary asked pupils standing on the platform to give a speech in the morning gathering. In that bi-weekly activity, we saw a conversation between a pupil and Wang.

One pupil said: "Principal, shall we be 'immunized' if we already got a draw giving speech?"

Wang patted on the child's head, and responded with smile: "No, you won't. Every child has an equal chance to stand on the platform. Although you have already spoken, you will improve your expressional ability if you keep preparing for the next time."

*The pupil laughed: "No wonder my mom suggested me to buy the lottery. I'll win the lottery."
It triggered Wang's laughing.*

When Wang got time, he always stood in front of the school gate saying good-bye to children. He liked to interact with youngsters. "I want children smiling at me rather than just routinely saying good-bye to me. The smile is from their sincere hearts," said the principal.

Being a serious and effective person, Wang did not like things done just because they needed to be done. For example, he used a different way to give his talk, called by him as "love talk," to the graduating classes. Normally, principals would gather all the sixth graders in an auditorium to give lecture. But, that is not Wang's style. He wanted his words entering into children's minds, so he went to every class of the sixth graders, talking about what kind of life being faced by pupils and what kind of preparation they needed to have when going to junior high schools. Thirteen classes were visited and each was spent 90 minutes for principal-pupils' interactions.

Moral dimension of leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992) was seen in Wang. He expressed explicitly that the first thing to lead a school was to lead the hearts of teachers, and sincerely caring about teachers is the key factor in leading teachers' hearts. Lan, a teacher, told us a story about how she was so touched by the principal's caring personality. It was an incident happening after the School Sports Game. Lan, who assumed a job of life education, a position in Students Affairs Office, worked exhaustedly for the Game. She got her leg muscle pulled after the Game was over. When she wanted to ask leave for sickness, Wang reminded her to check symptoms of her pains from doctor in order to be on leave in the name of duty, which may avoid Lan's gaining worse assessment because of sick leave. Appreciation was clearly read from Lan's face when she told us the story.

The good personalities Wang possessed helped him create a harmonious school climate. The leader told us no serious conflicts occurred now in staff meetings, which was not the case when he first went to Wen Elementary. At that time, one veteran teacher objected almost every proposal in meetings just for objection. Giving respect to the veteran teacher and solving problems for him, Wang found that meetings had become smoothly functioned. Building bridges between teachers and the principal was what Wang stressed. He handled teachers' problems before deteriorating. A principle insisted by him was that he would solve problems by any single teacher if it was a problem but he hated teachers using

group forces to get things done.

Leadership Styles

When going to Wen Elementary, we did not see Principal Wang frequently. He was a very busy man. Having good relations with Central Office, Wang got many meetings outside the school. In Taipei, the better reputation a principal acquired, the busier life he (she) might have. Especially when a principal was deemed as reliable, dependable and responsible, he (she) would be devolved to hold different activities by Education Bureau. After Wang's serving Wen Elementary, teachers felt that more activities held in schools than before. "Pupils may learn more from various activities," said one teacher.

Giving Authority. Although Wang was busy, Wen Elementary seemed to be in good order. A teacher

joked to Wang who just hurriedly rushing back to school one day:

"Principal, you don't need to come to school. We're in good shape under the management of office administrators. You may go home to have a comfortable sleep."

Giving full authority to the directors of each administrative offices and letting each layer of the administrative hierarchy be responsible for its affairs was Wang's leading philosophy. It made Wen Elementary operate effectively.

Transparent Decision-Making Process. Weekly administrative meetings were used by Wang to make school decisions. There were two forms of the meetings. One was composed of administrators from each offices; one, called "expanded meeting," included teacher leaders of each grade in because Wang wanted to increase teachers' involvement in the decision-making process. The expanded administrative meeting was held once per month. Participants in meetings were encouraged to expressed opinions. After discussions, Wang made conclusions as a closure. So, school policies in Wen Elementary were open to discussions.

We were told that administrative meetings were not convened so often last year since the former director of academic affairs, Lee, was not so cooperative with the principal in terms of pushing things

ahead. When serving in Wen School for the first two years, Wang did not change all the administrative staff at once. He left himself a transitional period to know more about the school. Being an old friend of Lee, the principal was tolerant and did not want to hurt Lee's feeling. Lee kept his position until he retired. And it was the time Wang assigned his own person to take Lee's place.

In Taiwan, every school runs a shop selling snacks, drinks, stationery and school uniforms. How to run the shop is charged by the principal. So, school shop sometimes becomes a secret place for outsiders. However, we were amazed by Wang's openness. His school was open for our observation, even the school shop. We interviewed the shop manager, who said that Wang required the detail ledger to be clear under the sun. Money earned was used as benefits to teachers. The shop budget was made transparent and open for investigation.

Humanistic Leadership. Wang liked to use the word "respect." He suggested that a principal needs to respect and trust teachers. "One can not keep one's eyes on teachers for twenty-four hours to make sure they're doing ok." However, when facing teachers' misbehaviors, Wang still had his responding strategies, which he felt proud of. He reminisced a past event:

There was a teacher who had record of leaving pupils alone in the classroom and going home during school hours because he owned a kindergarten. I did not punish him immediately at that time. Instead, I patrolled his classroom and taught for him when I found he's absent. After being caught twice, the teacher never did it again.

Usually Chinese people concern losing face terribly. Wang got full grasp of Chinese psychology, he gave the teacher chances and avoided causing the teacher losing face before colleagues. Wang told us that he never reprimanded teachers in the public. He would rather talking things straight individually with teachers. Since the principal's office sometimes created pressure for teachers, Wang preferred using teachers' office.

I prefer going to teachers' office. When I saw the teacher reading newspaper, I would read and chat with him (her). Usually, I started by talking something else, then step by step cutting into the topic I wanted to talk. This way works better than reprimanding the teacher.

When we interviewed teachers, we heard they used “humanistic” to describe Wang’s leadership.

Harmonious School Climate. Creating a harmonious school climate was what Wang engaged in.

Eventually, the personalities Wang owned were conducive to achieve the goal. When interviewing teachers in the school, most of them expressed that they’ve kept good relations with colleagues.

Besides, one teacher told us that Wang was good at communication.

When encountering conflicts between teachers and parents, Wang would keep a neutral position to investigate the causes and consequences of the problem. Then he employed his communication skills resolving the formidable issues.

Wen was molded as an affectionate community. A birthday cake was sent by the school shop on the staff’s birthday. Once there was a veteran teacher retired, teachers as well as the principal purchased a gold necklace for a gift. People cared about each other in the school.

Instructional Leadership. During these recent years, several projects promoted by Taipei Education Bureau included “the connection of kindergarten and elementary,” “open education,” and “the improvement of teaching and assessment.” Wang was involved in related kindergarten project and was a member of kindergarten evaluators. With these expertise and experiences, kindergarten became his first point for reform when he just went to Wen Elementary. He summoned teachers for meetings, and asked them to write teaching plans. A new teaching approach of open learning centers was proposed by Wang. He revised teaching plan teachers wrote. Wang really kept close eyes on kindergarten education for his first year in Wen. Caring mixed in strong leadership did result in improvement of kindergarten quality. A teacher said:

We sent our teaching plans with black prints in to Principal Wang. Pages with red marks came out in our hands. We were asked to type although we’re not good at computer. However, the unfinished parts were always typed by Principal Wang.

Concerning the part of elementary education, we did not see any active role Wang played in instructional leadership. Although Wang was involved in the project of “improvement of teaching and

assessment,” not all teachers in Wen were quite sure if they are doing right. Normal teaching patterns with no big problems in elementary section did not render any improvement actions from Wang. It seemed that under current circumstances, Wen had good achievement of students, which corresponded to parents’ expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

The roles of principals in Taiwan are not the same as those in western countries such as America or England. Because of big scale of school size, a more complicated structure of school administration is designed. Therefore, principals are not directly responsible for disciplining pupils or teachers’ instruction, which are jobs assumed by the director of student affairs and the director of academic affairs respectively. A principal actually acts like a captain in a ship, who directs the development of a school.

From this qualitative case study, we found that Principal Wang possessed good personalities which made him accepted by teachers. Under his leadership, the administrative offices functioned well, which let teachers concentrate on teaching. Harmonious climate created by Wang made most teachers committed to their jobs. Smooth communication channels between teachers and principal enabled Wen Elementary molded as an affectionate community. However, Wang’s vision concerning how to further develop Wen School was not seen. With competent teachers, Wang did not take any obvious actions to promote teaching quality for the elementary section. A learning organization seemed not yet shaped in Wen Elementary.

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