Examining the impact of Culture on Leadership in México [1]

Abstract

This is a study on the impact of culture on the leadership of Mexican principals facing political and socioeconomic pressures. The research is a continuation of an international study engaging researchers from 8 countries: Thailand, China, UK, Norway, Singapore, Norway, Brazil, U.S., and Mexico. Hofstede's theoretical framework was used to examine the principals' relationship with authorities and with groups, the concepts of masculinity and femininity, and the ways of dealing with uncertainty and conflict. The framework provided some insights of the interplay between culture and leadership, but it was limited for explaining the complexities of principals' roles. Ethnic diversity, and the socioeconomic and political context appeared to have more influence in principals' behavior than their perceptions of their roles.

Theoretical framwork

Although a substantial body of research has been conducted in an attempt to identify the characteristics of successful leaders, there is a dearth of research examining the impact of national culture. Indeed, only recently some studies have stressed the need for studying the influence of national culture and context on leadership (Walter & Dimmock, 1998). One of the most influential studies on the area of cross-cultural leadership was conducted by Geert Hofstede (1995, 1994, 1984,1980), who examined the impact of the national values on people who worked for IBM in over fifty nations. Hofstede found that although IBM employees from different cultures experienced similar problems, they used different solutions to solve them. The solutions differed from country to country and were influenced by the context and culture surrounding the company's leader (1991, p.13).

In one of the few studies using Hofstede's framwork to examine how the national culture influences the role of educational leaders, Walker, Dimmock, & Poon (1998) point out "the incompatibility of previous research on leadership conducted in the Western nations when applied to other countries". (p. 2). Given the important cultural differences found in this research, there is a need to further examine the influence of cultural context on leadership, especially in non-Western nations. A study of this nature is valuable for the analysis of how the sociological and political processes operate across culture.

Cultural dimensions

Geert Hofstede's work on culture and organizations (1991) was the theoretical framework used in the study. This framework is highly recognized in the study of the impact of cultural context on leadership behavior. According to Hofstede, significant differences can be found between and among group behaviors when compared with their peers from another countries in four main areas: social inequality, relationships between the individual and groups, gender social implications, and the ways of dealing with conflict and uncertainty (Hofstede, 1991, p. 14; Cordeiro, 1998).

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Project purpose and research questions
The proposed study was an attempt to better understand the impact of national culture on the role of school principals in southeast Mexico. The main questions to be addressed by this study are:
- How, if at all, do the school lives of high school principals in the study differ?
- How, if at all, does societal culture (the national culture of the country) impact the role of high school principals in Yucatan?
  - relationship with authority
  - relationship with groups
  - concepts of masculinity and femininity
  - ways of dealing with uncertainty, conflict
- How does the school principal view his/her own leadership style as reflected in interaction with teachers, parents and students during a normal day of work?
- How Hofstede's framework is able to capture the elements of culture when used to study school leadership in a Mexican state with diverse population?

Importance of the study
The study has special importance for both the theory on educational administration and the professional development of principals. It addresses a gap in the literature on school administration, especially in the research on school leadership in Mexico (Cordeiro, 1998). The results of the contextual analysis and environmental factors that influence leadership decision-making and behavior expand current knowledge in this area.

Although some research has been conducted on the cross-cultural differences on school leadership, most of this work has been conducted in business organizations (Hofstede, 1980). Since Hofstede work has been recognized as one of the most influential frameworks on comparative management, the study provided an important validation of this framework examining the impact of cultural context on school leadership in Latin America. The research is of importance for Mexican institutions interested in improving the quality of professional development for school principals and high school education in Mexico.

The findings of the study may also, in turn, be used to develop professional development programs that address the needs of Mexican high school principals and facilitate future research comparing the problems and experiences of school principals in other Latin American countries and the United States. The results can also be used to identify and prioritize areas and training and to identify potential obstacles for the successful implementation of professional development efforts. With the push for systemic educational reform in the United States, which entails explicit outcome standards, there are broad similarities to Mexico. The interplay between culture and leadership is a significant topic in both countries, as is the issue of how well Western theory is able to provide insight about the needs and problems of administrators working in a context that includes diverse ethnic groups.

Methodology
The fifteen high school principals who participated in this preliminary study are all from the Southeast of Mexico. The public schools were attended by the four main ethnic groups in the

location: Spanish, Mestizos, Mayan u other indigenous groups, and Lebanese. In selecting the participants, the researchers considered their background and attempted to match the subjects to the profile specified for the study.

Data were collected over a period of six months through on-site observations, document analysis and in-depth interviews with high school principals. The interview guide was divided into six sections: principal's background, selection process, and relationships with authority, gender, dealing with conflict and uncertainty, and relationships. All interviews were held in the native language of the participants, audio-taped and later transcribed. The interviews lasted approximately one hour to one and half-hours and were conducted in the principals' offices. The researchers spent at least one day observing each principal during a normal working day. School documents such as newsletters, school reports, etc., were collected during the site visits. The researchers used traditional ways for validating their observations. They took care of more than one medium-from observation, interviews, and document review. Field notes' analysis was qualitative. The researchers analyzed their notes by the key questions. They also showed their notes to the participants and confirmed the accuracy of quotes and descriptions of what they quoted about them. The case studies were organized around the main questions or issues (Stake, 1995).

The case study method facilitated an understanding of the process and events taking place and the complexities of the cultural context surrounding the principals (Patton, 1980). The methodology provided useful insights into the impact of the national and local culture on the roles of Mexican high school principals. The researcher used the cases in a way that helps the reader to be aware of their situationality and context (Stake, 1995).

Summary of preliminary findings and discussion
When applying Hofstede's framework to the study we found evidence that national and local culture influenced principals' lives. In the dimension regarding authority or power distance, we found the existence of a top-down hierarchy from the national to the local level that supports the idea of a large power distance among the different audiences. We also found evidence of gender inequality in that female principals were assigned to rural schools and received lowest pay than did their male counterparts who were working in urban settings. At the building level, however, rather than a top-down hierarchy, there were different interest groups interacting with each other since both teachers and students had representatives who met with the principal and advocate for their interests. In the classrooms teachers were working with a curriculum that emphasize an active role for students in their own learning. So, there were elements of at the building levels of short power distance as described by Hofstede.

In the dimension of uncertainty we found elements of both low and high uncertainty. Being a principal for those interviewed was stressful, particularly when superiors attempted to intervene in schools matters. There was willingness to take risks especially in the case of the female principals. There was also room for teachers to disagree with the principal's views. Although there were rules and regulations describing work responsibilities, they were general in nature and provided enough freedom for the principals to develop their own leadership style.

In the dimension of relationships, we found both group and individual orientations. There was a group consciousness but the emphasis was on the importance to fulfill obligations over relationships. Individualism and collectivism coexisted at the building level. In the dimension of masculinity/femininity we found that the principals expressed sympathy for the unfortunate, and concerns for people and the quality of life. There were no significant differences between male and female principals about the importance of their work, family time and professional development. All of the male and female principals had ambitious goals and viewed challenges as opportunities rather than obstacles. During the site observations we found that when most of the principals found themselves in situations that were congruent with their values and beliefs, they were flexible in applying regulations and even made exceptions. When they found themselves in situations to which they were opposed, however, they used the regulations as a rationale to justify denying requests to teachers and students. As a result, it is unclear whether the State Department mandates and regulations limit the principals' authority or are instruments used by principals to solve school problems in ways that are compatible with their beliefs and ideas.

The current economic crisis of the nation was reflected in the fact that principals generally work two jobs while teachers were hired on an hourly basis. This arrangement seriously limits the opportunities for professional development.

Conclusion

This was an exploratory study examining the impact of societal culture on the working lives of Mexican high school principals. The fifteen principals, males and females, were selected for this preliminary part of the research. The basic framework for this study was drawn from the work of Hofstede (1980). The Hofstede framework included four areas o dimensions: "(1) social inequality, including the relationship with authority; (2) the relationship between the individual and the group; (3) concepts of masculinity and femininity; and (4) ways of dealing with uncertainty." (Hofstede, 1991, p. 14). Data from the study were analyzed using Hofstede's framework .The research provided a better understanding of the impact of the national culture on school leadership, especially in a state with diverse population. It also provided some insight into how leadership theory developed in the West could be applied to understand the complexities of leadership in another cultural context. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with school administrators, document analysis, and on-site observations. This study is of importance for both Mexico and the United States and has implications for both the theory of educational leadership and the professional development of school administrators.

The dichotomous nature of Hofstede's model presents a problem because it does not allow for the possibility of multiple and seemingly contradictory locations within each dimension. The findings of this study indicate that the socioeconomic and political characteristics of the context need further consideration since these factors appeared to have more influence in the principals' roles than their cultural beliefs and context. Other factors that influenced the principal's role and merit additional exploration are age, marital status, religion and personality.

Currently, additional analyses are conducted to examine differences in the findings among public and private school principals who participated in the study. Further research efforts could concentrate in how teachers and students perceive the leadership strategies of the principal. New

studies could also focus on investigating in what degree these perceptions different from those of American school administrators, teachers and board officials regarding to the roles and problems confronted by school administrators.

The study brings a valuable contribution to research on multicultural and cross-cultural education and leadership, and provides a greater understanding of the Mexican school principalship. In addition, the project relates to national policies on educational reform in Mexico, and provides a useful framework for further collaboration of Mexican and US educators regarding the similarities and differences of both educational systems. The study was one of the first research on the impact of culture on the working lives of Latin American principals. The role of culture in principal behaviors and decision-making is an important topic in actual literature in school reform, especially important in schools with diverse population.

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