TEACHER INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL CHANGE: PERCEPTIONS OF SINGAPORE PRINCIPALS

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Background: Data were collected in Singapore as part of a ten-country international study that focuses on cross-cultural comparison of principal attitudes towards teacher involvement.
Aim: This paper presents secondary school principals' perceptions with regard to teachers' responsibility-taking in the context of school change in Singapore.
Sample: Fifty-two secondary school principals in Singapore.
Method: A survey instrument consisting of twenty scaled sub-sectioned questions.
Results: Three features emerge from the Singapore perspective. Firstly, school principals in Singapore believed that teachers should have a relatively high level of involvement. Secondly, in comparison to the others, principals in Singapore were relatively hesitant to involve their teachers. Thirdly, there was no significant difference in their perception of teacher involvement in the thematic clusters of human relations and teacher support.
Conclusion: Knowledge, understanding and sensitivity to the perceptions of principals could facilitate professional collaboration in the service of contribution to education.
Keywords: Teacher involvement, principals, school change, Singapore

教師參與學校變革：新加坡校長的觀點

背景：在新加坡所搜集的有關的資料，是 10 國跨文化比較研究校長對於教師參與學校變革的態度這個項目的組成部分。
目的：本論文討論新加坡中學校長對於教師在學校變革中所肩負的責任的看法。
調查對象：52 位新加坡中學校長。
調查方法：對校長的展望有所認識、理解，敏覺，能促進專業協作，爲教育做出貢獻。
調查結果：新加坡校長的觀點有三個特色：第一，新加坡的校長認爲教師必須深入參與學校的變革。第二，和其他的地區比起來，新加坡的校長對於讓教師參與學校變革持相對猶豫的態度。第三，對於教師參與人際關係中主 題聚類和教師支援，校長的觀點大同小異。
總結：對校長的展望有所認識、理解，敏覺，能促進專業協作，爲教育做出貢獻。
關鍵字：教師參與, 校長，學校變革, 新加坡

Introduction

The constructive impact of teachers in the leading edge of change is generally acknowledged, with reference to change that is interpreted in the widest sense, from classroom innovations to systemic impact (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006; Yeap, Khine, Lim, & Low, 2005; Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000). A more recent international study reveals that teachers are attracted to schools that provide them with opportunities to experiment and design appropriate programmes for their students; they do not prefer schools that load them with additional responsibilities and keep them away from their students (Poppleton & Williamson, 2004). Further, it was surfaced that "the more freely that teachers can express" the belief that "schools can be enhanced rather than diminished by adopting a critical perspective on change", "the stronger the professional community will be" (p. 318). The active involvement of teachers in school change promotes positive work life

outcomes for teachers, as well as generating teachers' receptiveness and positive feelings toward change itself. In relation to the above, relationships with significant others, inclusive of colleagues who collaborated in education change activities, appear to achieve the outcome of confirming the systemic value placed on education reforms enacted by teachers (Sinclair, 2005). Many writers (for example, Hallinger, 1992; Lane, 1992) have also maintained that a school as effective as its leadership, in congruence with the centrality of the principal's role as a key finding in numerous research (Bolam, McMahon, Pocklington, & Weindling, 1993; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). There is a need to generate more knowledge and increase our understanding of forces that influence the participation of teachers in school change. This paper is part of a bigger study that focuses on the perspectives of principals with regard to the involvement of their teachers in school change. The study involves the concurrent participation of Australia, Canada, China, Hungary, Japan, Israel, Netherlands, South Africa and the United States of America.

Surfacing Thematic Clusters of Teacher Involvement

A survey instrument consisting of twenty scaled sub-sectioned questions was used. School principals were requested to conceptually connect various possible responsibilities of teachers in school change with issues that were related to their own levels of openness to teacher involvement. For each responsibility, the input focussed on the extent principals perceived that their teachers wished to take part, should take part, and the extent of hesitancy they felt about teachers

taking up the responsibility. In sum, the aspects explored were, namely, teacher-wish, teacher-should and principal-hesitancy. A total of 52 secondary school principals in Singapore participated in the survey, out of which 50 returns were usable for data analysis.

Questionnaire items were clustered into positions on a continuum of role responsibility. Items that correspond to administration and coordination of school activities were assigned the Administration and Coordination (AC) Index. Items under this index include the following: determining student enrolment in classes (item 1), conducting staff meetings (item 10), setting policies and criteria for hiring teachers (item 12), and deciding on the distribution of school budget (item 15). The Human Relations (HR) Index includes items such as formulating changes in teacher-administration relationships (item 7), giving organized feedback to the administration and staff (item 9), setting policies for changes in parent involvement (item16), creating new ways to improve school's relationships with the community (item 18) and organizing new programs for the use of volunteers in the school (item 20). The Teacher Support (TS) Index covers items 3, 4, 6, 14 and 17 which deal with organizing supportive assistance for teachers; developing policies on professional benefits; developing professional in-service programs; developing and conducting information programs; and developing approaches to the induction of new teachers respectively. Items that correspond to the fundamental role of teachers on classroom matters that directly affect them were clustered in the Classroom Activities (CA) Index. This index includes developing new

departmental courses for students (item 2), planning school changes in curriculum content, method and materials (item 5), setting policies for student behaviour (item 11), and planning innovative ways of class scheduling for teachers and students (item 19). In addition, this index is inclusive of items that concern implementing and evaluating change (items 8 and 13) as such responsibilities would probably affect changes in the classroom.

Across countries, principals in general believed that teachers should have a high level of involvement. Analysis of data from every country in the study surfaced consistent relationships among teacher-should indices, indicating that principals were most likely to include teachers in responsibilities with a direct impact on CA, considerably more likely to include them in TS, somewhat more likely to include them in HR, and were least likely to include them in AC. The principals in each participating country were also of the opinion that their teachers had no desire to be as involved as much as they thought teachers should be, in responsibilities associated with HR, TS and CA. Compared to the other three indices, administration responsibilities emerged as the one where the perceptions of wish and should were closest. The section below presents significant features of the Singapore perspective and attempts to link current information to the local education context and research.

Findings and Discussion of the Singapore Perspective

Findings of the study revealed that compared to all-country average score distribution percent-wise, principals in Singapore believed that teachers should be much (score 4) or very much (score 5) involved in AC. Singapore secured a score of 44.50 against the All-country Grand (AG) of 35.62 (Table 1). With regard to HR, TS and CA respectively, the Singapore scores in relation to others were as follows: 66.40 against AG=58.50 (Table 2), 68.90 against AG 66.59 (Table 3) and 86.87 against AG=77.11 (Table 4). In all four thematic clusters for the should-items, there was a positive difference in each of the Singapore-AG pair. This perception that teachers should have a high level of involvement is also reflected in the Singapore Grand Mean (GM) of 3.91 against All-country Grand Mean of 3.71. Teacher-should indices sorted in ascending order of teacher involvement places Singapore seventh in position country-wise, in relation to the other nine countries.

Index Name : Score-Group	Singapore	All-country Grand (AG)
Admin & Coord : Percent (1 or 2)	13.17	26.18
Admin & Coord : Percent (3)	42.33	38.20
Admin & Coord : Percent (4 or 5)	44.50	35.62

Table 1: Singapore Score-Distribution Percentages for Administration and Coordination (AC) Index within Teacher-Should Column

Index Name : Score-Group	Singapore	All-country Grand (AG)
Human Relations : Percent (1 or 2)	2.80	10.94
Human Relations : Percent (3)	30.80	30.56
Human Relations : Percent (4 or 5)	66.40	58.50

Table 2: Singapore Score-Distribution Percentages for Human Relations (HR) Index within Teacher-Should Column

Index Name : Score-Group	Singapore	All-country Grand (AG)
Teacher Support : Percent (1 or 2)	2.80	7.55
Teacher Support : Percent (3)	28.30	25.85
Teacher Support : Percent (4 or 5)	68.90	66.59

Table 3: Singapore Score-Distribution Percentages for Teacher Support (TS) Index within Teacher-Should Column

Index Name : Score-Group	Singapore	All-country Grand (AG)
Class Activities : Percent (1 or 2)	0.33	4.55
Class Activities : Percent (3)	12.80	18.34
Class Activities : Percent (4 or 5)	86.87	77.11

Table 4: Singapore Score-Distribution Percentages for Class Activities (CA) Index within Teacher-Should Column

Secondly, although principals in Singapore shared the perception that teachers should have a high level of involvement, they appeared to be hesitant, scoring a GM of 2.10, in particular, with regard to AC (2.45). Indices sorted out in decreasing order of hesitation surfaced Singapore in the third position overall, second in AC, third in HR and TS, and fourth in CA. In relation to the above, compared to all-country average score distribution percent-wise, principals in Singapore were relatively hesitant to involve teachers in AC, attaining a Singapore score of 12.93 against the All-country Grand (AG) of 11.04. In short, although Singapore principals appeared to be of the perception that teachers should be more involved, they were relatively hesitant, in particular, with regard to administration and coordination. The sections below present discussion pertaining to the first two findings and also attempt to integrate the discussion as a whole.

The principals' perception that there should be high level teacher involvement, yet they were comparatively hesitant, surfaced as two of the three distinctive

features gathered from analysis of the Singapore data compared to the grand data of all countries. It could be that on matters pertaining to school administration and coordination, principals in Singapore have "roles and responsibilities" defined as follows: "leadership, strategic planning and administration, and management of staff, students and resources" (Principals' Handbook, 2006). The handbook is a guide to all principals, issued by the Ministry of Education, and made available to all staff members via the intranet. Principals would probably not want to be perceived as delegating excessively or being irresponsible in abdicating. Principals in Singapore are also ranked annually and they are held accountable for all key aspects of school matters. To a certain extent, the pressure on school principals is akin to those experienced by counterparts elsewhere, in meeting accountability expectations (Billot, 2002).

Thirdly, there was no significant difference between the means of Human Relations (HR) and Teacher Support (TS) for all three obtained order of teacher-should, teacher-wish and hesitation indices in Singapore. The means were homogenous at the 0.05 level. In contrast, AG means differed significantly at the 0.05 level for HR and TS in both teacher-should and teacher-wish indices. In the Singapore context, it could be that HR and TS were so closely intertwined.

A series of previous studies in Singapore revealed a consistent finding that the learning of human relationship skills emerged as the most prominent learning in leadership mentoring (Lim & Low, 2004; Lim, 2005). One earlier indication of the possible significance of human relationships in leadership surfaces in a study by Low (1995) on aspiring school leaders. In addition, the actual life practice of such learning in educational settings on-the-job was reported by teacher-mentors (Ho, 2003) and practising school principals. Workplace examples of the practice of such skills included greater initiative in reaching out to help, exercising care in relating like offering encouragement and acknowledgment, communicating appropriately, consciously creating opportunities to know and relate well beyond formal settings, as well as supporting and sharing. In essence, getting things done and through people is of paramount importance, and the focus of school principals in Singapore on relating with people appeared to facilitate the development of the perception by teachers and significant others that their interests and themselves were valued. Valuing teachers quintessentially entailed supporting them and items under the teacher support index, namely, organizing supportive assistance for teachers; developing policies on professional benefits; developing professional in-service programs; developing and conducting information programs; and developing approaches to the induction of new teachers, were congruent to the focus of developing such perceived intention.

In addition to the above, educational developments in Singapore appear to advocate relationship skills. "People our Focus" (*BlueSky,* 2003, p. 13*)* was officially pronounced as a corporate value of the Singapore education system, encompassing the statement of "we value people, seeking to bring out the best in everyone" in "having and showing care and concern; serving people with sincerity", "seeing the potential of each person and helping each to develop and succeed", "building a team and

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recognising that everyone has a part to play in the organisation" and "respecting people with backgrounds or views different from ours" (p. 14). This was followed by proposals to strengthen the relationship between the schools and Ministry of Education (*To light a fire,* 2004) as well as to encourage an open and sharing culture (*Touching hearts, engaging m*inds, 2005). Further, there was also reiteration of "the government's firm commitment to ensuring that the teaching service remains attractive and satisfying" (*GROW Package,* 2006, p. i), with incentives and schemes that aim to cater to the personal and professional aspirations of teachers.

It is thus apparent that the consistent finding of preceding studies and current developments in Singapore could provide some insight into the phenomenon of lack of significance difference at the 0.05 level between the means of human relations and teacher support, as perceived by local school principals.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A country-specific focus in this multi-country study indicates that Singapore principals were relatively reluctant to involve teachers though they deemed teachers should be highly involved, and there was a tendency not to differentiate between human relations and teacher support. It could help to heighten the awareness of the principals and their teachers with regard to the significance of responsibility-taking of teachers in school change. It is further suggested that there

be concurrent revelation of previous international research findings (for instance, Poppleton & Williamson, 2004) indicating that the active involvement of teachers was important in promoting positive work-life outcomes for teachers, besides generating teachers' receptiveness and affirmative feelings towards change itself. It is in the interest of the Singapore principals to appreciate that the earlier finding that the most positive work-life consequences for teachers occurred if teachers were involved at the highest level of change (for example, initiating, planning or shared decision-making) more so than at the customary middle level (for example, implementing or supporting change), or at the base level of change activity (for example, having no role or resisting change). Such knowledge could perhaps encourage the Singapore principals to be less reluctant towards the active engagement of teachers in the highest level of change activity. In addition, it is recommended that future research attempts to capture the principals' perceptions of practice in the context of what they are perceived by others to have done. In particular, teachers' perspectives of their own involvement could be of relevance and meaning. The systematic gathering and consolidation of multiple perspectives could offer useful insight to substantiate or challenge the perspectives of school principals toward teachers' involvement in school change. In sum, increased knowledge, understanding and sensitivity to the perceptions of both principals and teachers could facilitate professional collaboration in education.

Acknowledgement:

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