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Leadership practice change: Critical perspectives from the Chinese educational leaders in an Australian offshore program

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Abstract: This paper explores Chinese educational leaders' self-perceived practice change after undertaking an Australian offshore program from 2002 to 2003. The findings show that exposure to different perspectives appeared to expand participants' views and equipped them with a wider range of strategies in leadership practice. The themes of leadership practice cases reported by the participants varied, with relatively different emphasis in each sector. School principals tended to place an emphasis on relational and operational issues and system officials appeared to be interested in the big picture issues. University administrators seemed to pay particular attention to relational issues like empowering, motivating, and involving staff. In spite of these differences, there seemed to be more similarities than variance in these aspects. Moreover, the participants seemed to be cautious about radical changes in practice, reiterating that local contexts and cultures must be considered when accommodating Western educational ideas. It is argued that participants' self-reported changes in leadership practice were the results of mediation rather than the direct transfer of Western ideas and practices into the Chinese context. This study was primarily interpretative and based on the interview responses. Further research is suggested to investigate the long-term influence of this course upon the participants, through observations of participants and consultation with relevant stakeholders.

Keywords: educational leadership, transnational education, cross-cultural study

Introduction

This paper presents some findings from an interpretative study which explored Chinese educational leaders' conceptions of leadership and learning, and examined the perceived influence of an Australian offshore graduate course upon their conceptions and leadership practice over a one year period from 2002 to 2003 (Wang, 2004). Some of the key findings have been reported elsewhere (Collard & Wang, 2005; Wang, In press); for instance, comparison of participants' conceptions prior to and after the course indicated an expanded range of, and more complex conceptions. However, this paper focuses primarily upon the participants' self-perceived leadership practice change. How did they perceive their leadership practices after undertaking the course and did they report any practice change? Were there any differences represented among the three sectors (school, educational system and university)? Were these self-perceived changes the results of meditation or direct transfer of educational practices from the West? This paper sought to answer these questions and provide insights into cross-cultural leadership development.

Literature review

Research has been undertaken to investigate Chinese culture and leadership traditions (Kirkbride *et al.*, 1991; Redding, 1990), and specifically Chinese educational leadership in recent years (Bush & Qiang, 2000; Ribbins & Zhang, 2004). Many scholars (e.g. Chen, 1995;

Seagrave, 1995; Wong, 2001) suggest that there are certain historical-social influences on the development of leadership practice in China, such as Taoism, Confucianism and the strategic thinking of Sun Tzu. Other scholars (Blunt & Jones, 1997; Child, 1994) also investigated the influence of Chinese culture upon leadership and came up with similar interpretations. Child (1994) concluded that Chinese cultural traditions have long been underpinned by four significant values, and suggested that leadership perceptions and practices are influenced by these values: the importance of face, collectivism, harmony, and respect for hierarchy. Bush and Qiang (2000) have argued that contemporary Chinese culture is a mixture of traditional, socialist, enterprise, and patriarchal cultures. Consequently, Chinese leadership traditions and practices have been influenced by different elements of culture and forces.

Some empirical studies have been conducted to investigate Chinese leadership behaviours and perceptions. For instance, Miles (1999) conducted a study to explore evolving Chinese leadership behaviour. The findings indicate a clear and pronounced movement toward what in the West would be labelled formal management behaviours such as organizing, planning, controlling and structuring types of behaviour on the part of leaders at the local level. Comparison to Western management models indicates that “relationship” underlies any technical approach to leadership in a Chinese context, and that transformational rather than transactional models of leadership may be a more appropriate reference framework.

Other scholars (Ling et al., 2000) have explored the implicit conceptual framework of Chinese leadership and indicated four factors of leadership: personal morality, goal efficiency, interpersonal competence, and versatility. The Chinese participants considered virtue as the most important feature of leadership, which shows that Confucian traditional ethics continue to have tremendous influence over Chinese people. Interpersonal competence was given the highest ratings, reflecting the enormous importance of this factor, which is consistent with Chinese collectivist values. Ling et al. (2000) argue that Chinese tradition, values, and perceptions are so different from those in the West that there is an urgent need to better understand each other. Western theories of leadership cannot be very effective when directly transported onto Chinese people. Chen (2002) examined the leadership role of secondary school principals in China and indicated that the position of principals demonstrates inconsistency in empowerment because there is a confrontation between the existing bureaucratic culture and the emerging democratic culture in Chinese schools, with the former favouring political and systemic interests and the latter stressing the interests and desires of people working in and for schools.

Although some studies have explored Chinese leadership, there is little systematic research to investigate leadership perceptions and practices, particularly from Chinese educational leaders’ perspectives in the international education context. It would be significant to investigate how they mediate the influence of Western ideas when they bring traditional assumptions about leadership to an interaction with contemporary Western discourses. This interpretative study was informed by the gap in the literature and sought to address the issues identified.

Research method

Fifty-two educators from Zhejiang Province, China enrolled in the offshore course of Master of Educational Leadership conducted by an Australian university in 2002. Twenty were selected in this study to maximize the possible variation, ranging from varied disciplines, ages, genders, teaching, professional and sectoral experience. The participants comprised 15

males and 5 females, approximately proportional to the gender ratio in the cohort. Eight school principals, 6 university administrators, and 6 system officials participated in this study.

An in-depth and semi-structured interview technique was used to explore participants' responses. Two sets of interviews were conducted in April 2002 and April 2003 to examine the perspectives of 20 participants. The average time for each interview was approximately one hour. All documents distributed to participants were translated from English into Chinese and all interviews were administered in Chinese. Each interview was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. The 200 pages of transcripts were coded based on emergent themes and categories. The responses were sorted into conceptual categories on the basis of similarities and differences. The transcripts were also summarised as a series of vignettes that focused on individual's conceptions and self-reported leadership practice. The data analysis was conducted by moving between the full transcripts and the vignettes. The study sought a better understanding of participants' conceptions and leadership practice by making a comparison between their responses prior to and after undertaking the course.

Findings

Self-reported changes in respondents' leadership practice over one year are presented in Table 1. The variations in the extent of change (large, moderate or small/no) were based on self-reports of respondents. Self-reported practices which focused on organisational, structural or cultural changes were deemed as large changes. Those focusing on modifying or developing previous practices were regarded as moderate or some changes. Respondents who reported small/no change did not cite any example of practice change or admitted they made small change in their work places. Various themes emerged from cited examples, which shows that the course may have played a role in expanding participants' leadership strategies and developing their actual leadership practice.

Table 1 Self-reported change in leadership practice and themes

School principals	Extent	Themes of examples or cases cited by respondents
George	Large	Promote teacher leadership and student leadership
Hilary	Large	Promote participative leadership
Kevin	Large	Adopt a percolation model in policy implementation
Jeremy	Moderate	Encourage team and collaborative learning
Michael	Moderate	Encourage the use of case study and action learning research
Nathan	Moderate	Improve performance management
Isabella	Small	Pay attention to soliciting suggestions from teachers
Luke	Small	Pay more attention to communication with teachers and students
System officials		
Bruce	Large	Promote shared vision and create mission statements
Adam	Moderate	Pay attention to a practical orientation in policy planning
Cindy	Moderate	Raise a sense of strategic planning
Felix	Moderate	Establish multiple channels of information flow
Diana	Small	Have little change in leadership practice due to the nature of job
Eric	Small	Report no substantial change in leadership practice
University administrators		
Oliver	Large	Promote empowerment and delegation of power
Paula	Moderate	Encourage team learning among staff
Steven	Moderate	Motivate followers and facilitate their development
Tony	Moderate	Encourage active involvement of followers
William	Moderate	Show concern for staff's feeling and growth
Richard	Small	Ask for suggestions from colleagues

Most participants seemed to have made efforts to relate the learning to their practice. However, many lamented the structural and environmental constraints and their dilemma in addressing the discrepancy of their “theory espoused” and “theory in practice” (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). To preserve the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used in this study. Table 1 indicates that three of the eight (37.5%) school principals, one of the six (16.7%) system officials and one of the six (16.7%) university administrators reported large change. School principals appeared to be more receptive to new perspectives and likely to make larger changes in practice than their counterparts in other sectors. Four (66.7%) university administrators reported moderate change while three (50%) system officials and three (37.5%) principals claimed moderate change. As shown in Table 1, two (33.3%) system officials, two (25%) principals and one (16.7%) university administrator reported small change. In this study, system officials were more likely to be cautious in practice than principals and university administrators.

The participants from three sectors appeared to differ in their focus of change in leadership practice. Five principals tended to place an emphasis on relational and operational issues, such as participative leadership, team learning, or policy implementation. Three principals who reported large change all focused on promoting active participation and extensive consultation. For instance, Hilary described how she designed a regulation on teachers’ duties through extensive consultation, feedback, and modification. This practice was completely different from her previous experience of top-down enforcement without any consultation of staff. Three other principals indicated moderate change. Jeremy described how he promoted team and collaborative learning among staff through seeking feedback and suggestions, and conducting collaborative projects. Nathan reported how he integrated humanistic approaches with their performance management system based on scientific management principles. Isabella and Luke reported little change but they indicated that they had begun to pay more attention to communicating with or soliciting advice from staff or students.

Four system officials tended to be interested in the big picture issues like macro level thinking, strategic policy planning, and organisational structure. Bruce reported large change and described his efforts in promoting shared vision and creating mission statements in twelve schools. Three officials indicated moderate change. Cindy described how she made it a rule to have monthly strategic meetings regularly with the department heads in her bureau. They checked implementation of last month’s plans and designed operational plans for the next month while referring to the long-term plan at the same time. Felix described how he had gained some insights from Western flattened structure and then established multiple channels of information flow to improve the existing organisational structure. Diana and Eric denied any obvious change in practice, indicating personal or structural constraints as the reason for this.

Five university administrators seemed to pay particular attention to relational issues like empowering, motivating, and involving staff. Oliver reported a large change and illustrated how he delegated the power of recruiting staff to heads of departments. Four administrators indicated moderate change. Paula described how she encouraged team learning among staff by preparing teaching plans together. Others cited examples to show that they had begun to empower and encourage the staff to reflect on their work practices (Steven), promote the staff’s participation in order to achieve their recognition and support (Tony), or communicate with staff effectively when setting tasks (William). Richard reported small change, but he indicated he may now sometimes ask for advice before designing plans.

Discussion and conclusion

Exposure to different perspectives appeared to expand participants' views and equipped them with a wider range of strategies in leadership practice. They also seemed to be cautious about radical changes in practice, reiterating that local contexts and cultures must be taken into account when accommodating Western educational ideas. Many interviewees indicated the tensions existing in their workplaces between the traditional Chinese and Western orientations. They also indicated their dilemmas in addressing these issues, for example, on the one hand, many participants claimed that participatory learning and shared leadership would inevitably become a trend in China in the near future; and on the other, they commented on strong cultural influences, environmental constraints and resistance.

The findings reveal that the themes of leadership practice cases reported by respondents varied, with relatively different emphasis in each sector. The different cultures of the three sectors and the nature of their work may explain such differences. In spite of these differences, there seemed to be more similarities than variance in these aspects. One of the implications is that these participants had been trained and operated in a broader Chinese cultural, social, and educational context, which played a more important role in shaping their perspectives and practical work than the subcultures of different sectors. In other words, a generic educational culture in China plays a unifying role across different educational sectors. This finding is congruent with Hallinger and Leithwood's (1996) argument that the societal culture exerts a significant influence on educational administrators beyond that of the specific organisation's culture.

It is interesting to note how participants addressed the tensions between the Chinese and Western cultures. In order to fulfill the requirements of the course and develop professionally, they were supposed to accommodate the needs of Western academic norms and transfer the knowledge learned to their workplaces. But in order to develop in the Chinese context, they needed to continue to be mindful of the way things are done there. Cultural dissonance seemed to be unavoidable during the course delivery. People tend to escape cultural dissonance by retreating to the dominant culture in which they are living. In practice, after the course participants may continue to be subjected to the strong forces of the Chinese culture and context, while mediated the influence of Western culture and ideas. It is argued that their self-reported changes in leadership practice were the results of mediation rather than the direct transfer of Western ideas and practices into the Chinese context.

This study was primarily interpretative, based, as it is, on the interview responses from the participants. Further, the study was exploratory; the researcher tentatively indicated the sectoral differences between groups with no intention to generalize the findings to the wider population. It would also be significant to investigate the long-term influence of this course upon participants. Follow-up research is therefore suggested to further examine the applicability of Western ideas and how those participants are relating these perspectives to their workplaces longitudinally, through observations of the participants and consultation with relevant stakeholders like teachers, students, parents, and superintendents.

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