Chapter 13
Principal Leadership in Diverse Cultures:
A Comparative Study

Allan Walker
Hong Kong Institute of Education, China

Haiyan Qian
Hong Kong Institute of Education, China

ABSTRACT

This chapter draws empirical findings from a larger study that compared principals' leadership across three different international cultural contexts (Hong Kong, Singapore and Perth, Australia) and explored the influence of culture on leadership. Data were collected using interviews and structured vignettes from a purposive sample of 21 principals across three different cultures and were analyzed to arrive at a set of site-specific and cross-cultural comparative propositions. One set of these propositions is reported in the chapter. Societal culture was found to act as a filter and mediator to create substantial differences in leadership behaviors relevant to collaboration. The paper suggests re-thinking in the preparation, training, hiring and selection, of principals, all of which – given multi-ethnic, diverse societies – require more culturally aware and sensitive policies and practices.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter adopts a comparative perspective on how cultural or values differences shape school leadership in two East Asian and one Western setting. It argues the need for and benefits of a cross-cultural perspective in understanding leadership in education. Reasons supporting the argument have ranged from dissatisfaction with academic imperialism, concerns about the effects (positive or negative) of globalization, realization of the importance of values in educational leadership and a search for deeper understandings within Western societies themselves of the multiple ethnic and cultural groups which increasingly comprise their own populations (Bush & Middlewood, 2013). While a substantial amount of the accumulated literature thus far explores the theoretical and conceptual influence of culture on educational leadership, surprisingly more empirical research

is needed. The empirical foundations which have been laid, however, such as Hallinger and Kantamara's (2000) investigation of culture on reform implementation and leadership in Thailand, have confirmed the importance of "opening new windows" through which to view leadership, "…by exposing the hidden assumptions of the cultural context" (p. 202).

This study compares school leadership in three different societies – Hong Kong, Singapore and Perth (Australia). Specifically, the chapter seeks clarity on four issues. First, given that global policy trends affect all three school systems; it is important to know how similar policies can be seen in leadership practices across the three sites, given their diverse cultures. Second, the chapter seeks to identify the ways in which culture actually work to shape and influence leadership behavior. To what extent, for example, was it overt or covert? Third, a cross-cultural framework consisting of six dimensions as a heuristic device is applied in order to draw comparisons between the three sites. This analysis investigates the relative importance of the dimensions in accounting for culturally-based differences in leadership behavior. Finally, the cultures of all three sites are fast changing, increasingly diverse, and subject to modern contemporary influences.

The chapter is divided into four sections: the first uses selected literature to argue for recognition of the analytic and conceptual power of 'culture' and the importance of cross-cultural understanding; and acknowledges the limitations of such an approach. It also describes briefly the six cultural 'dimensions' which guided data collection. The second section sketches the methodology employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and vignettes. The third section presents selected findings of the study across the three sites in one area – principal-teacher relationships. These findings are framed as a series of single site and then cross-cultural comparative propositions generated from the data. The final section discusses a number of conclusions which may be useful for framing further debate and research in the area.

BACKGROUND

Informative Literature and Framework

Impact of Culture on Leadership

The basic if not thesis underpinning the study of cultural influence on the principalship is simple: How leaders are influenced by, and differ according to, *inter alia*, their societal culture (Shields, 2002; Walker, 2004). It is widely accepted that leader behavior and actions are influenced by values at a personal level (Begley, 2000; Fullan, 2003). The thesis is that leader behavior is also shaped by wider societal values, which aggregate to form culture. Since different cultures and societies draw values from diverse bases, it follows that leaders' cultural values produce different understandings, actions and relationships (Walker & Dimmock, 2005a). Societal cultures in contemporary societies are complex, consisting of nested layers of multiple sub-cultures. For purposes of analysis, we adopt Hofstede's (1991) definition of societal culture, namely, "patterns of thinking, feeling and acting" underpinning "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (pp. 4-5).

Adopting this definition to study the principalship in different societies involves exploring the extent to which culture explains differences between leadership and schools. More fundamentally, it questions the extent to which schools and school leadership are culture bound or culture free (Trice & Beyer, 1993). This issue is particularly pertinent given the propensity of systems, especially those in less-developed societies, to clone policies and practices associated with more economically and militarily powerful societies (Philips & Ochs, 2003). A tendency for similar educational policies and practices to spread across societies is widely attributed to globalization (Bottery, 2004) and championed by international agencies such as the World Bank, academic 'knowledge producers and

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