INNOVATION AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE: A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

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Background of the Problem

Educators have been struggling for over twenty years to find the combination of approaches that will be most effective in leading schools, through periods of turbulence and change. Marzano (2003) discovered that in effective schools standardized test pass rates measure at 72.4% versus only 27.6% in schools found to be ineffective. Given such high stakes as these, and given its high impact, trustworthy leadership is a critical element of success in any organization (Avolio and Luthens, 2006) the importance of effective educational leadership has never been greater than at present. School failure is incredibly costly in economic, social, and human terms. Gladwell (2006) found that psychologists and other experts trained in specific aspects of human behavior were able to do what he refers to as 'thin slicing' a social, teaching or leadership situation. Thin slicing refers to being able to look at a short segment (a few minutes or less) of, say, a teaching situation, and determine with over 90% accuracy whether the instructor was a success or failure in his or her regular classroom setting. Finding the factors, which lie behind snap-insights like these and using this knowledge to enhance training has tremendous possibilities for the field of education. These insights are needed given the tremendous impact of leadership and its impact on school effectiveness.

Conducting informal interviews with several teachers of varied backgrounds at a local international school provided insights into some common themes they were looking for in educational leadership. There seems to be a thread of ideas that recur in many of these discussions. The administrator of a school needs to, "have been a teacher, know what it is like in a classroom, and make decisions from that perspective." They need to have, "a background and experience in teaching." "Know what empirical research says about instruction and school effectiveness." They also need to be "clear on what they want from you (the teacher)." A teacher also mentioned, "they need to know how to teach and how to help the teacher improve teaching." Knowing how to "help the teacher improve" was important. "Understanding educational pedagogy" was noted. Comments such as these, point towards teachers viewing instructional leadership, teacher mentoring and classroom presence as being of significance.

Teachers were also concerned that the administrator "be empathic" and "be able to understand where students are coming from." Other concerns included knowing that "some people are open to discussion, others just want direction." Teachers want administrators to "be able to understand where others are coming from. Be able to balance process and people without going too far in either direction." The "ability to work out this difficult balance" was seen as important. "Be able to understand people," "Be clear with no ambiguity," "Be brief and understand that there are only so many hours in a day" in order to complete tasks, were further factors of significance. Effective "interactions with parents, teachers, and students" was another factor stressed. "Be an active listener and be open-minded." "Political ability," "Understand both the teacher and the management side, understand psychology," "Be able to get people to discuss openly and be comfortable with you," were all also given prominence. Teachers seemed to be looking for a balancing of the mental and emotional sides of a given situational equation, an empathic approach from their administrator that acts as a backdrop in any given task combined with a student-centered focal point for understanding the changes needed in the school.

Teachers were also concerned that an administrator has "moderation skill. Being able to walk in and see a situation where there are two sides that do not see eye to eye. But the leader is able to find a successful conclusion. Can't always blindly support teachers, but don't always go against them in interactions with parents." If "There are two different sets of teachers one which supports a program and one heavily against it" as was the case with an example given by one teacher, then the administrator needs to find an effective way to mediate. Know how to "assess different personal styles with varied groups of people," "Open-minded and can look at both sides without being judgmental until the time is right (for a decision)," "Be supportive of the teacher in parental matters," "talking with teachers, sit together, not just e-mail," "make respect a priority," "understand different personalities and be approachable and friendly,"

"cohesiveness with faculty and students," "maintaining harmony," all received emphasis. Teachers seemed to be expecting a fairly high level of ability to proactively resolve conflicting issues, to deal with differing needs amongst stakeholders, both with staff and students, in addition to parents.

The common threads that emerged in these interviews lead in the direction of finding a series of dilemmas or challenges in today's varied and diverse educational climate that administrators need to be able to respond to effectively in leading schools through these often troubled times. Looking at what teachers are saying about what they need, as well as what scholars in the field of education and leadership are saying about dealing with the obstacles and challenges the leader faces, will give us information we can use in enhancing leadership capacity in a manner that furthers student progress and growth.

Work previously done in the American context on identifying and utilizing common threads that relate to effective leadership and to enhancing student learning includes the work referenced on the web site Mid Continent Research for Education and Learning (2008). MCREL uses a multiple perspective feedback profile using 21 leadership responsibilities, which are identified and rated in a 92-item survey. Principals are able to use these ratings combined with professional development tools available on the site to enhance leadership practices.

Statement of the Problem

Today's educational environment is in a constant state of flux. As has often been stated, change is the only constant. Given the varied directives and imperatives coming from all levels in the educational system, and the demands from every quarter from parents to school boards, students and community members, the administrator can feel that he is cast adrift, lost in a sea of ever changing circumstances and needs that adjust and mutate moment by moment. What is needed in this environment is a set of consistent perspectives to guide the administrator. A measurement of the response to these challenges is needed, which can be calibrated in a manner so as to guide future innovation, change, and improvement. In short, what is needed is to determine what the challenges are for the educational leader, what the response effectiveness is, and how training can be developed and improved so as to enhance performance.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to discover the challenges faced by the educational leader (school administrator), to measure the performance against these challenges, and then to suggest and begin to develop a training regime geared to enhancing and improving the response to these challenges.

Research Design

What was envisioned in this research was an input-output process that started with identifying the current challenges through an overview of general and specific research in the area and through an interviewing process. For the interviewing process portion, the school in which the researcher works, Ruamrudee International School (RIS), was utilized. The researcher's role is that of teaching and setting up programs for students with special needs in the middle school at RIS. RIS is a respected international school with procedures generally considered to be in line with best practices in education. Established in 1957 by the Redemptorist Fathers of Thailand, RIS is a k-12 institution with Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation serving approximately two thousand students of varying nationalities. The teachers interviewed come from a variety of national backgrounds. Their teaching and professional credentials are from institutions generally considered to be exemplary in the field of education. As such, given their sound credentials combined with experience in the Thai context, they are viewed as a solid prototype for identifying challenges faced by today's educators. In the manner of identifying challenges, the themes drawn from these educators, combined with specific and more general research, helped in clarifying what a prototypical school should be like in terms of facing and dealing with challenges in education. This prototype enabled a better examination of Thai schools to be effected in this study. Once the above challenge identification process was completed, an assessment tool was developed to facilitate the measurement of identified challenges. It was at this point that one moved from the input or research side of the process and crossed a demarcation line into the output or development side of the process where one was actually producing results with educational leaders in schools in an interactive manner. This movement involved ascertaining actual realities on the ground in sample schools and determining appropriate strategies based on best practices for leadership. The difference between these gave data for a 'gap analysis' where needs were identified and remedial procedures attempted to address the needs. The needs remediation involved model building where one moved towards bridging the gap shown in the gap

analysis by offering timely and relevant developmental options. These options were drawn from the following possibilities:

- Handbook to address concerns
- Strategic plan or action plan
- Short courses to address identified areas of difficulty

Validation followed and completed this sequence.

Research Objectives

1. To develop a viable list of challenges faced by educational leaders in today's schools. (Challenge)
2. To develop a performance assessment tool for evaluating educational leadership. (Challenge)
3. To rate the responses to foundational leadership challenges from a sampling of educational administrators. (Challenge)
4. To develop specific responses to improve educational leadership in sample schools which may also have wider application in schools facing similar difficulties. (Developmental)
5. To innovate current leadership practices so as to make them more effective in sample schools in a way that may have wider application in schools facing similar obstacles. (Innovative)
6. To create, or begin the creation of, a generalized process for improving educational leadership across a variety of settings. (Innovative)

Research Findings

Research findings are presented below by objective:

Objective One (Challenge)
A thematic list of challenges was evolved as follows:
One- Head/heart balance focuses on balancing staff needs and task requirements. Conceptually, the head heart/balance gave credence and verification to ethical and religious teachings, which have existed for over twenty five hundred years.
Two- Instructional leadership focuses on working with teacher's skills to develop efficacy in instruction.
Three- Conflict resolution focuses on dealing with and overcoming conflict.
Four- Presence focuses on visibility and being available for staff. Conceptually, the idea of presence gave credence and verification to ethical and religious teachings, which have existed for over twenty five hundred years.
Five- Dealing with ambiguity focuses on being able to sort conflicting requirements.
Six- Optimistic outlook deals with overcoming adversity and maintaining a positive spirit in the school.
Seven- Focus on student learning looks at taking the student academic needs as a primary concern.
Eight- Mentoring teachers looks at training teachers and developing effective performance.
Nine- Ethically based leadership looks at doing the right things in the right way.
Ten- Differentiation looks at providing instruction to fit the student.

Objective Two (Challenge)
A list of **thirty indicators** was developed to measure these challenges in schools. Following this, the list was expanded with the splitting of four indicators.
The **School Administrator Practices Frequency Evaluation (SAPFE)** was developed for use in schools.
The **SAPFE** was found to be reliable for use in schools through a pilot study.
The **SAPFE** was found to be valid after adjustment by three experts in the field: adjusted instrument now contained thirty-four indicators.

Objective Three (Challenge)
Surveys were successfully administered in schools and results measured on the **SAPFE**

Objective Four (Developmental)
Sample schools were found to be **ineffective** in administrative practices related to **C-1 Head/heart balance** with a mean score of **77.65**
Sample schools were found to be **ineffective** in administrative practices related to **C-2 Instructional leadership** with a mean score of **74.86**

Sample schools were found to be **ineffective** in administrative practices related to **C-3 Conflict resolution** with a mean score of **77.80**

Sample schools were found to be **ineffective** in administrative practices related to **C-4 Presence** with a mean score of **76.07**

Sample schools were found to be **ineffective** in administrative practices related to **C-5 Dealing with ambiguity** with a mean score of **76.07**

Sample schools were found to be **effective** in administrative practices related to **C-6 Optimistic outlook** with a mean score of **81.55**

Sample schools were found to be **effective** in administrative practices related to **C-7 Focus on student learning** with a mean score of **80.07**

Sample schools were found to be **effective** in administrative practices related to **C-8 Mentoring teachers** with a mean score of **82.35**

Sample schools were found to be **effective** in administrative practices related to **C-9 Ethically-based leadership** with a mean score of **81.53**

Sample schools were found to be **marginally effective** in administrative practices related to **C-10 Differentiation** with a mean score of **79.93**

Objective Five (Innovative)
Potential remedial paths were identified for each challenge:

For C-1 Head/Heart Balance where weakness indicates lack of understanding of emotional intelligence and an inability to understand or adjust to teacher needs, the **identified path** was retreats and/or training sessions on emotional intelligence and its application to school life, survey on staff goals and strengths matched to school needs.

For C-2 Instructional Leadership where weakness indicates lack of understanding of instructional leadership role and lack of updated pedagogy, the **identified path** involved modeling of roles for instructional leadership or training in application of the role in schools.

For C-3 Conflict Resolution where weakness indicates lack of understanding of factions developing in a school and an inability to mediate, the **identified path** involved analysis of school sections and organization with a view to reducing organizational or structural conflict and mediation.

For C-4 Presence where weakness indicates too little time spent in classrooms, plus failing to keep track of developing student and teacher growth needs, the **identified path** involved classroom visitation initiatives, such as setting a goal or percentage for visits of administrators and monitoring compliance (Barrett, 2007), school community relations program implementation, and management by walking around (Peters, 1991).

For C-5 Dealing with Ambiguity where weakness indicates discomfort with ambiguity and a lack of understanding of conflicting needs prioritization and requirements and how to prioritize such, the **identified path** involved demonstration of the uses and potential inherent in ambiguity and needs prioritization.

For C-6 Optimistic Outlook where weakness indicates lack of belief in teachers/school/students/parents or any combination of one or more of these four, the **identified path** involved developing asset lists to clarify strengths and working with community leaders to establish common priorities.

For C-7 Focus on Student Learning where weakness indicates failure to understand the learning environment, the **identified path** involved needs analysis with extensive student input and updating of staff in current learning techniques.

For C-8 Mentoring Teachers where weakness indicates lack of focus on the teacher role in schools, the **identified path** involved implementation of the supervision as support model combined with an increase in teacher involvement in all aspects of school life

For C-9 Ethically Based Leadership where weakness indicates lack of moral fiber or not taking ethics seriously, the **identified path** involved instruction in ethical behavior or implementing a mode such as Starrat's (2005) responsible leadership.

For C-10 Differentiation where weakness indicates lack of understanding of student diversity and techniques for differentiating instruction, the **identified path** involved implementation of programs for inclusion and updating in differentiation techniques.

Objective Six (Innovative)
The findings are listed from the lowest to the highest level of ineffectiveness:

For C-3 Conflict resolution, which was determined to be ineffective, a proposed generalized process for enhancement and developmental questions at each of six process cycle stages were developed.
For C-1 Head/heart balance, which was determined to be ineffective, a proposed generalized process for enhancement and developmental questions at each of six process cycle stages were developed.
For C-5 Dealing with ambiguity, which was determined to be ineffective, a proposed generalized process for enhancement and developmental questions at each of six process cycle stages were developed.
For C-4 Presence, which was determined to be ineffective, a proposed generalized process for enhancement and developmental questions at each of six process cycle stages were developed.
For C-2 Instructional leadership, which was determined to be ineffective, a proposed generalized process for enhancement and developmental questions at each of six process cycle stages were developed.

Recommendations for Future Research

(1) The challenge approach is at an early stage of development with this study. Further study should seek to refine, enhance, and possibly add to or combine some of the challenges presented and used in the study.
(2) The SAPFE instrument developed for use in this study has not yet been calibrated using large samples of schools. The instrument should be the topic of future studies which can work to determine its application in a wide variety of educational contexts beyond the Thai provincial public school settings which were the subject of the present study.
(3) The study underlined the need for qualitative profiling of administrative practices in Thai schools. This area is a potentially fertile one for further research which could have a tremendous positive impact on Thai educational contexts.
(4) Prioritizing the challenges by their impact on administrative practice and their perceived importance was beyond the scope of the present study. This type of prioritizing offers the potential for valuable knowledge development and should be the subject of future research.
(5) Calibrating the impact upon students of successful implementation of effective challenge responses is a further area of potential research that needs to be pursued.
(6) Looking at a longitudinal study which examines the impact of these challenges over time and with changes in administration and management team membership is an area with great potential for future research.
(7) Application of the general parameters of the study beyond the Thai context or in terms of a comparison study with the present one is an area which offers potential researchers with the chance to see which areas offer possibilities for common practice and which do not.
(8) Interviewing of students with the ideas brought forth by these challenges offers a potential to research how student learning is impacted in the affective context.
(9) Consideration into research on the application of these challenges in the general community, given that student learning is ultimately relevant at all levels of society, is potentially very valuable.
(10) A correlation type study which looks into the relationships between the challenges, the indicators and the climate in schools would be instructive.

Recommendations for Practice

(1) Work should be done in schools on implementing and having trial runs for the training processes at objective six. This would allow for the value of the process to be reviewed in more detail, while having a positive impact on the schools under review.
(2) Work needs to be done in schools with the implied paths presented at objective five. This would give a view of how the paths work in practice and which seem to be more valuable or less valuable given context and local circumstances.
(3) Schools need to work with their administration teams on implementing effective responses to these challenges. This offers the potential for schools to improve their impact upon students and community members.
(4) School staff should be trained in effective responses to challenges. This will offer the potential not only for staff development, but also by extension, improvement throughout the whole educational system.

(5) The SAPFE could be used as a tool to offer possible improvement paths. It could be administered in a school, areas of difficulty determined, and then either the relevant path from objective five or the process from objective six could be applied to facilitate school improvement.

(6) The training process could be applied based on the perception of staff members in a given school about the need for improvement. This offers the advantage that those who choose a certain type of training or development path themselves are more likely to support it because of the 'buy in' factor.

(7) The material presented in this study offers great potential for use as a staff development tool in schools both at the management and teacher levels. The idea should be pursued.

(8) The five challenges which were found to be ineffective in the sample schools can be used as a developmental enhancement tool for schools along the lines of the processes presented at objective six. This should be pursued.

(9) Combining the paths with the training processes to develop an integrated approach to improving schools is an approach that has great potential. This should be considered.

(10) The tools used in the study could be applied in a holistic context within a full school district or area to facilitate improvement which could then be used as a lever to enhance other elements of the educational system. This approach may have great merit and needs to be considered closely.

(11) An inherent limitation of the current study, because of its design and context, is that application is limited to provincial schools. To extend this, a case study approach, making the necessary adjustments, could be carried out in selected Bangkok schools to clarify usability of the study scope beyond the provincial level.

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