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Creators: Xuan, Z., Chuhuai, K., Doan Hong, T., To Viet, H., Adamu, D. and Underwood, M. J.

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Comparing leadership internationally: challenges and reflections.

AUTHORS: Xuan Zhou, Doan Hong Trang, Chuhuai Ke, To Viet Huong, Doris Adamu, James Underwood*

University of Northampton
and
*University of Cambridge, Wolfson College

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Abstract

This paper is a co-written paper by five MA Education students at the University of Northampton and James Underwood, Principal Lecturer at the University of Northampton and a PhD student at the University of Cambridge. We are all currently engaged in research that involves comparing aspects of education in the UK with another nation. The research that we are each personally undertaking addresses a range of topics. These all relate to an aspect of education leadership ranging from student leadership to school and university management. There is one common underlying research question which underpins all the studies which is: *in what ways has comparison between nations been a valid approach to understanding education and leadership?* This question is addressed successively via our individual stories in this paper.

This paper is linked to a paper presented in May 2015 at the University of Cambridge entitled: “Breaking boundaries as writers, researchers and me-searchers, the challenges and rewards of completing an MA as a community of practice.” In which we discussed in depth our experience as a research community. This paper has therefore also been informed by a distinct perspective on the nature of Masters’ level study.

Introduction

The research projects that we describe and discuss in this paper were all conducted while studying on an MA Education at the University of Northampton. In every case they have involved the comparison of education within the UK with education in the writer's nation of origin. All of these nations of origin are developing nations with rapidly growing economies. This contextualises the nature of our studies and the conclusions that we have reached.

We each tell our own story, in our own personal way. However, in each we address:

- the reasons why we chose to undertake the research that we chose to do.
- the conclusions that we reached through our research, in some cases these are very much provisional conclusions.

The ordering of the authors' names has no significance in terms of the contribution each made to this paper. However, we are presenting in order of completeness in terms of the position our research is in. Although we study on the same MA programme, unusually the University of Northampton has rolling intakes with students joining in every term. Therefore there is an implied journey as the first story is of a researcher at the start of their research journey and the last two are of researchers looking back at a completed research journey and a completed thesis.

All these studies were conducted using a shared research design based around questionnaires that informed in depth interviews. Although within this framework the research instruments for each study were significantly different. We adopted a shared approach co-designing using a mixed methods approach all framed within an interpretivist paradigm. This very much reflects the co-operative nature of the University of Northampton MA Ed.

Doan Hong Trang's story,

At this point in time, as I write this section, I am in an early stage of my research as I joined the MA programme in February 2015. The working topic of my MA thesis is: *changes to the assessment system in Vietnamese primary schools after The Circular 30*. However, at this stage this may still change. I frame this under the broad topic of comparative studies in leadership, as assessment in Vietnamese schools is very much directed by a larger government vision and agenda. It is therefore led from the top but also asks teachers and headteachers to engage in the process of leading this change.

In line with many noticeable adjustments in the Vietnamese educational system during recent years, in 2014 the Vietnamese government issued The Circular 30/2014/TT-BGDĐT dated 28 August 2014 which imposed a significant change to the assessment system in primary schools by essentially replacing previous test schemes by teachers' written feedback. The policy has immediately become a controversial issue which has received a high degree of attention from society - especially from schools, teachers, students and students' parent. As with many other Vietnamese people who were raised under the traditional assessment system

of marks and grades, I myself doubted the validity and feasibility of this policy. This was the reason that pushed me to conduct this research project.

My initial research questions are (1) *What is the purpose of the assessment system in Vietnamese schools in general and those for primary students in particular?* (2) *What changes have been made to the Vietnamese assessment system?* (3) *How do these changes affect the school system/teachers/students/parents?* Before conducting this research, I responded to these proposed changes with initial resistance, I thought the policy was neo-colonialist and in relation to this that this approach would not be applicable in a Vietnamese context. This initial perception led to my last research question: (4) *is the policy valid and feasible?*

However, after my initial study into assessment theories and debates, I have recognised the weakness of the traditional test scheme that I used to be familiar with. I found that I agreed with Holt (2005) who suggests that: “There are two main reasons why we test children: the first is to threaten them into doing what we want done, and the second is to give us a basis for handing out rewards and penalties ... - like all coercive systems. The threat of a test makes students do this assignment. The outcome of a test enables us to reward those who seem to do it best.... Tests arouse fear and satisfy greed”. (Holt, 2005: 52). Therefore, in my literature review, I am aiming to deepen my understanding of perspectives on summative and formative assessment and their purposes.

As it has been too early for quantitative research on the results of the changes implemented in 2014, I decided to do a “small scale study”, more specifically an exploratory case study as my purpose is not to reach conclusions representative of the broader context but to explore a particular contemporary phenomena (Yin, 2013) with the expectation of conducting further research in the future. My intention is to hold 12 in-depth interviews with 6 teachers, 4 parents, 1 head teacher from a primary school in Hanoi, Vietnam and 1 expert from the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam in order to understand these changes in the assessment system from multiple perspectives.

I am in the early stage of writing my dissertation and I will continue my research towards my final conclusions. However, after the first four in-depth interviews with two teachers, a mother and a primary student, I have noticed some interesting factors. A positive aspect is that, based on this small sample: students’ stress has decreased, their competitiveness has reduced, and there is more encouragement in schools. However, drawbacks to the policy include concerns over the quality and fairness of teachers’ feedback, the lack of teachers’ experience and training, overload in terms of teachers’ paper work and concerns regarding student motivation. Besides, this I found it a very interesting fact that controversial discussions regarding changes in the assessment system in Vietnam now are very similar to ones in the UK 30 - 40 years ago, with debates about formative and summative assessment, especially after the Education Reform Act 1988. This led me to the decision to delete my fourth research question as I now believe that the changes are necessary and feasible. I have now modified the question to become: *in what ways can we reduce the constraints and promote the effectiveness of the assessment system in Vietnamese primary schools?*

Xuan Zhou's story,

The topic of my thesis is: *perceptions of leadership and decision making in Chinese universities.*

The most significant piece of research that I have done during my MA year was a dissertation in which I have looked at leadership styles in Chinese universities. I started with the premise that by definition, at the very minimum, 'leadership' in any educational organization aims to achieve a common target of developing practice and achieving the co-operation of teachers, pupils and parents (Leithwood, 2006). At present, Chinese education is at a developmental stage in most university subjects, although simultaneously it has an ancient cultural history of advanced learning. As leadership research in Chinese universities is at a relatively early stage my thesis outlines perceptions of leadership decision making in Chinese universities. The decision to research into perceptions of practice rather than into practice directly was a very significant one for me to make and took much consideration. Interestingly I found that both my Nigerian colleague, Doris Adamu, and both Vietnamese colleagues, To Viet Huong and Doan Hong Trang, felt the same way and decided after much thought to focus on perceptions in their thesis. Reaching this simultaneous conclusion may suggest that in emerging economies we have to understand the perceptions of people before we can directly address practice. This touches upon risks most often discussed within a neo-colonialist discourse whereby such researchers describe how it may be assumed that practice can be easily transferred from the West to the emerging economies but the reality of this may be much harder (Christina et al. 2003).

My literature review for this thesis aimed to define distributed leadership, and then presented and discussed two types of leadership model, which are the transformational model and the transactional model. Through analysing these leadership models I was able to build a conceptual framework from which I could reflect on perceptions of decision-making styles. As regards my specific methodology, I conducted a survey via questionnaire and followed this with a small number of interviews. I contacted people representative of three different levels of hierarchy among university leaders to do the interviews (the vice-president of a university faculty; the president, of a different faculty; and the principal of a degree awarding conservatoire). I also sent questionnaires to lecturers within these faculties and institutions. I analysed the results to identify how lecturers perceive leadership and decision-making, and to find out lecturers' suggestions to improve school leadership when making decision.

Overall, driven by globalization and development, the Chinese educational field is entering into a new stage. The aim of my thesis was to increase understanding of what perceptions of leadership and decision-making in universities in China are, at what are still relatively early stages in this process of change. I discuss: the ways in which leadership styles affect decision-making, which kind of leadership model and decision-making styles lecturers prefer and what factors impact on this. In addition, I frame my analysis within the context of different cultural backgrounds and educational systems. In my conclusions I make two

tentative suggestions. One is for the further empowerment of administrative departments and academic departments in educational systems. Another is that a more distributed model of leadership may be valuable. However I do not suggest that these changes will be easy or should be rushed.

The title of this paper is ‘challenges and reflections’ so in conclusion to my story I would suggest that one lesson for early career researchers who come from the emerging economies at the start of the research process should be this: conducting exploratory studies and particularly perception studies is of enormous value. It may seem frustratingly slow when one can place oneself under both external and internal pressures to change practice, yours or others quickly. However, in what are for these nations new fields, to put it simply: we need to know where we are before we can be sure of the path we need to go down and that others will follow.

Chuhuai Ke’s story,

My research topic for my MA dissertation is: *coping strategies for Chinese students studying in the UK*. I justify its inclusion under the broad theme of comparative research into leadership, as those who travel to study are often those likely to attain leadership positions, whilst they are also those who are leading change in terms of relationships with the West.

As an International student studying in the UK I have had to deal with many issues adjusting to living and studying in a new culture. Last year, I was studying for my top up degree (International Business Communication) at the School of Business, University of Northampton. This year, I am studying towards an MA Education at the School of Education. During my studies at the University of Northampton, I have faced a lot of challenges. At the beginning of the first term, I could not understand much of what my lecturers were saying and my speaking and listening skills did not seem adequate for high level study. I also work for the Students’ Union and the Welcome Team of the University. In this role I have noticed that many Chinese students face similar challenges. Last but not least, with increasing numbers of Chinese students studying in the UK, this research will not only support Chinese students in reflecting upon and resolving the challenges that they face, but can also be used by tutors who might need to teach Chinese students.

I am still in a relatively early stage in my research. However, my provisional research questions for my thesis are:

1. Why do Chinese students choose to study in the UK?
2. What positive experiences or benefits do students perceive from studying in the UK?
3. What kind of problems do most Chinese students have and how do they deal with them?

4. What are the differences that students perceive as regards the learning culture in China compared to the UK?

5. How do they adapt to the different educational system?

The secondary data came from a rich variety of research into this area, much of it very recently written. My primary data was collected from participants who are Chinese students who have recently been studying at the University of Northampton. Through our module International Perspectives on Education study, I gained a deeper understanding regarding the different educational systems in Chinese and English universities. There are plenty of differences between the academic systems that affect Chinese students studying in the UK. An example is England has a different system of academic degrees whilst Chinese universities only have a standard degree. English universities have a tutorial system, but Chinese universities do not have this system.

Zhou & Todman (2009) claim that there are two principal characteristics that Chinese students adapting to study in the UK have: firstly, adaptation is an active process of learning. This suggests that learners should be prepared to adapt different teaching and learning approaches, but should not necessarily rapidly discard their own ways of learning. Secondly, this adaptation should be considered as a two-way model of influence. Cortazzi and Jin (2005) have argued that UK teachers and Chinese students should understand each other's culture, so teachers would learn from students, and Chinese students should learn from UK culture whilst not losing their own cultural values (Zhou & Todman, 2009). Ryan & Hellmundt (2003) claim that with respect to teaching and learning issues, students should be encouraged to reach a common understanding which may reduce the gap between international students and tutors. There are many isolating aspects between China and the UK that may make it difficult for Chinese students to cope in the UK. However, it is possible to find different solutions to deal with them.

Provisional conclusions that I have reached in this stage of my research are that Chinese students studying in the UK have three motivations: to reach a higher degree and/or qualification, to improve themselves to have a better career, and to improve their English language. The Confucian culture affects Chinese students studying in the UK, it encourages Chinese students to adapt and develop their study and life in the UK. It also means that Chinese students have high learner motivation and respect for teachers. Therefore to avoid the danger of culture shock students need to learn Chinese ways to adopt to the West, a middle path that is neither resistance nor a rejection of our pasts.

To Viet Huong's story

My thesis examined: *the attitudes of high school English teachers in Vietnam towards the implementation of the Communicative Approach, which is commonly known in Vietnam as communicative language teaching (CLT)*. This issue was addressed within the context of

public high schools in Hanoi, Vietnam. It is framed here within this broader topic on leadership for much the same reason as my colleague Doan Hong Trang has written above: significant decisions, such as a change in teaching strategy in Vietnamese schools, involve teachers becoming leaders of change.

What initially aroused my interest in this area can be explained by two reasons. First of all, Vietnam is the country where I completed my schooling years, as well as being my first place of exposure to English education. The traditional teaching method of grammar translation has long been, and is still widely adopted across the country (Denham, 1992). This method is believed to have deterred Vietnamese students from improving their communicative abilities in English. Consequently, I personally think that finding a way to improve the English communication skills of Vietnamese students is a major challenge which needs to be addressed for the entire education system. Another reason for me to pick this topic was that, being a Vietnamese student who is studying in the UK, I realised the complications of international students' lives due to the lack of English language proficiency. I also realised that the more fluently and confidently they could communicate in English, the better their career prospects would be. Thanks to my educational experience in the UK, I have realised the importance of the communicative approach in English teaching.

For this research, I chose a mixed methods approach for pragmatic reasons. My objective for this research was to understand the perspective of English teachers around Vietnam about CLT methods. As it is rational that personal points of view or experience cannot be simply measured, in this particular case, a combination between qualitative and quantitative approaches would provide "a more accurate and adequate understanding" (Biesta, 2012). In order to collect data for this research, I decided to use a survey approach. To be precise, I have used questionnaire and interview methods for gathering data for the research based on the shared outline model that we developed.

The biggest difficulty that I faced during the data collection process was the attitude of Vietnamese teachers. Kieu (2010) has discussed that Vietnamese teachers generally do not show an interested reaction when being asked to participate in research. Therefore, being strongly aware of this fact, I decided to use questionnaires both to prompt the interest of Vietnamese teachers and especially, to find dependable participants for the in-depth interview, which was the main data collection method in this research.

As regards my conclusions: data collected in the questionnaire and interviews shows that almost all Vietnamese teachers believe that they have an understanding of, or are at least aware of the issue of needing to develop better communication, and have tried to adopt the communicative approach when English teaching. However, their answers also demonstrate that actually, there are quite a few Vietnamese English teachers who have not understood this teaching method thoroughly and who have some common misunderstandings about it. Secondly, the large majority suggested that speaking and listening are two skills that Vietnamese students can benefit from the most. This can be considered to be a positive change in the teachers' mind-set. They deeply understand the weaknesses of Vietnamese students, which is verbal communication and thus, have started to adjust their teaching style.

Last but not least, all the teachers realised the advantages that Vietnamese students might gain from using this new teaching method. Nevertheless, in contrast to this positivity, they do not support the implementation of communicative approaches in the current Vietnamese educational context. In addition, they gave out five key difficulties as well as suggestions to reduce those constraints.

Regarding the experience of working together, the cooperation between colleagues contributed greatly to my precious experience on this masters' course. Although we were interested in different areas of education, we still found places for cooperation and we provided many useful suggestions to our fellows. In the very early stages of this course, we all realised that a mistake that could not be found by ourselves, might be detected by others. Thus, we helped each other to proofread almost all assignments, and all agree that the role of collaboration in learning is undeniable. Finally, during the process of conducting the thesis, we still kept presenting and exchanging opinions along with difficulties together. I strongly believe that such a relationship and cooperation between us played an important role in the completion of my studies.

Doris Adamu's story

The topic of my dissertation was: *teachers' perceptions regarding effective leadership styles in Nigerian schools.*

Leadership is not one size fits all as Harris (2008), rightly puts it: leadership styles vary from place to place, however, effective leadership is one that is mindful of the situation and environment, which includes the staff and corporate culture among others, then adjusts its style to suit the environment. Regardless of their different opinions on the best leadership style, one thing is certain school leadership is aimed at strengthening the performance of education leaders, with great focus on educators, to improve student achievement.

I particularly took interest in this topic after stumbling across a quote by the famous writer Chinua Achebe (1983), he said that, "there is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else...but leadership" (p.1) he added that the problem with Nigeria is simply the failure of leadership. So I wanted to explore what was perceived as effective school leadership in Nigeria and issues surrounding it through the eyes of teachers.

The purpose of my research study was to:

- examine teachers' perceptions on effective leadership styles in Nigerian schools.
- analyse what teachers perceive to be the leadership traits of effective leaders within public and private schools
- determine the relationship between leadership style and teachers'/students' motivation.
- discuss socio-cultural influences on school leadership and their impact on good practice.

My research questions were:

1. What leadership qualities do Nigerian teachers believe is associated with effective school leaders based on their preferred leadership style?
2. What do Nigerian teachers believe is good school leadership practice?
3. How does good leadership practice, motivate and influence better performance in staff and students as perceived by Nigerian teachers?
4. What leadership style do teachers perceive is more effective in Nigerian schools and which is prevalent?

Literature review

In my literature review I discussed the concept of leadership, different leadership styles, and leadership traits. Then I focussed on educational leadership, leadership in Nigeria and Nigerian schools, cultural influence on leadership and teachers' perceptions of effective leadership styles in Nigeria. I used a concurrent mixed method approach, and my main tool for data collection was survey questionnaires and personal interviews, the questionnaire being the primary source of data collection. The sample used for this study was a convenience sample and was therefore only a partial representation of the general population of teachers in Nigerian schools. The concurrent presentation of the quantitative and qualitative findings gathered from the sample was necessary as it gave me an in-depth understanding of the study and provided a deeper analysis which helped me answer my research questions. The qualitative interviews conducted in Nigeria with the teachers were used to confirm findings from the survey questionnaires.

Findings

- Findings showed that possessing strong moral values and interpersonal skills is the most important leadership quality associated with effective leadership, far more important than professionalism or expertise.
- Nigerian teachers perceive as good leadership practice one which involves subordinates in the decision making process, gives a certain degree of freedom to work independently and encourages the sharing of ideas.
- Nigerian teachers believe that a democratic leadership style is more effective and better for Nigerian schools. However, many teachers still believe that it would be best to combine authoritarian and democratic leadership because they feel that Nigerian teachers to an extent need a strict leadership style to keep them in check and to maintain the "culture of respect" for elders and authority among the students.
- Culture has a major influence on good leadership practice in Nigerian schools.

Recommendation

The research that has been undertaken for this dissertation has highlighted specific topics on which further research would be beneficial. One of the areas where information is lacking was the teacher's perceptions of effective leadership styles and also research into the well-known phenomena of leadership by conformity, and obedience to authority in Nigerian schools.

Concluding remarks

We have placed this online immediately following its presentation at the University of Northampton Education Research Conference. We would welcome further discussion, comment and debate regarding the issues that we have raised in the stories that we have presented here.

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