The Relationships Among Authentic Leadership, Teachers’ Work Engagement, Academic Optimism And School Size As Moderator: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

Positive psychology has recently gained interests among educational researchers due to its role in improving interpersonal relationships and offering a new research framework (Hoy & Tarter, 2011) among various positive psychological concepts in educational context, authentic leadership, teachers’ work engagement and teachers’ academic optimism are three of the highly explored. Authentic leadership deals with a principal’s desire to understand oneself and others and act in accordance with his/her core values in order to lead the school to success (Avolio & Mhatre, 2011; Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). While teachers’ work engagement concerns with how much a teacher is involved and enthusiastic about his or her work (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Klassen et al., 2012), teacher’s academic optimism is a teacher’s belief that he or she can teach all of the students effectively, stress the importance of learning and trust in students and parents (Beard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2010; Woolfolk Hoy, Hoy, & Kurz, 2008). Although authentic leadership and teachers’ work engagement have been found to be positively related (Bird, Chuang, Watson, & Murray, 2012; Wang & Bird, 2011), so far there have been no studies that focused on the relationships among the three. Furthermore, since school size has a significant impact on various school outcomes particularly the interpersonal processes (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder Jr, 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009), we hypothesized that school size would moderate the aforementioned relationships. The purpose of the study was to propose a conceptual model linking authentic leadership, teachers’ work engagement and academic optimism with school size as a moderator. Several research propositions based on the model are presented. The proposed model is expected to be a valuable tool for conducting related future researches and developing initiatives to improve principal authentic leadership in school.

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Keywords: developing, optimism, related, teach
1. Introduction

In the past decade, researchers from various fields have turned their attentions to positive psychology and started to introduce its concepts in their work. Considering that positive psychology in educational study is still in its early stage (Hoy & Tarter, 2011), proposing and utilizing the framework in educational research is a promising notion since it “enriches the conceptual base and helps the field accumulate understanding” (Hoy & Tarter, 2011). Among the positive psychological traits studied in educational context, authentic leadership, teachers’ work engagement and teachers’ academic optimism are three of the most promising for both academic and practitioners’ standpoint. Since there has been no prior research linking these constructs collectively, the aim of this paper was to propose a conceptual framework to rationalize these relationships as well as the effects school size has on them. The outline of this paper started with the reviews of the main constructs: teachers’ work engagement, teachers’ academic optimism, and authentic leadership respectively, followed by explaining the basis for conceptual model and ended with ideas for future research.

2. Teachers’ work engagement

Due to both internal and external pressure that put on teachers to perform and account for high student outcome, many teachers experienced high stress and burnout and some decided to leave the profession. This resulted in burnout becoming a hot topic in educational research until recently when the concept of positive psychology has brought interest to work engagement. Work engagement, based on self-determination theory, is “a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Past studies in business organizational context indicated that employees with high level of work engagement were highly motivated and performed well on the job (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Likewise, the level of teachers’ work engagement was positively related to their work performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010). In sum, teachers’ work engagement deals with how much a teacher is occupied and excited by his or her work (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Klassen et al., 2012). Although there are other measurement tools for work engagement readily available, the most prominent one in educational research is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Klassen, et al., 2012). The instrument has been validated and found suitable with both western and non-western teachers although the researchers recommended adjusting questionnaire items when used in non-western context.

3. Teachers’ academic optimism

Academic optimism is originally a school-level 2nd order construct rooted in and developed from positive psychology (Hoy & Tarter, 2011). Past research showed a positive impact of academic optimism on student achievement (I. H. Chang, 2011; Smith & Hoy, 2007). In 2010, Beard and colleagues (2010) hypothesized and confirmed academic optimism as a latent individual-level construct consisting of 3 factors: teachers’ academic emphasis, teachers’ trust in parents and students and teachers’ self-efficacy. Teachers’ academic optimism is defined as “individual teachers’ beliefs that they can teach effectively, their students can learn and parents will support them so the teacher can press hard for learning” (Beard, et al., 2010). Researchers initially used separate tools to measure each of the three 1st order factors separately and utilized factor analysis to confirm the construct. Later Beard and colleagues (2010) shortened, simplified and combined the three measures and introduced a new 11-item questionnaire called Teacher Academic Optimism Scale (TAOS) specifically made for measuring the construct.

4. Authentic leadership

Authentic leadership is a form of leadership that originated from positive psychology theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). It was also contributed and positively related to transformational leadership (Spitzmuller & Ilies, 2010; Walumbwa, Luthans, Avey, & Oke, 2011). Walumbwa and colleagues (2008) defined authentic leadership as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development.” The latent construct comprises of 4 factors: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective. In brief, a principal with authentic leadership is a school leader who aspires to
understand his/herself and teachers and behave in accordance with his/her core values in order to steer the school towards its goals (Avolio & Mhatre, 2011; Gardner, et al., 2011). Several measures have been conceived to measure authentic leadership but the 16-item Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) by Walumbwa and colleagues (2008) were the most widely used.

5. The main relationships

Since teachers’ belief and attitude are predictably influenced by their principal, it is no surprise that previous research findings reinforced that school leadership had a significant relationship with teachers’ academic optimism and work engagement. Authentic leadership of principal was found to be positively correlated with teachers’ work engagement (Bird, et al., 2012; Wang & Bird, 2011). Although no prior research has studied the relationship between authentic leadership and teachers’ academic leadership, according to Rutledge (2010), a school with high level of transformation leadership was likely to have teachers with high level of academic optimism. Similarly, while a study of the relation between academic optimism and work engagement of teachers has not been done, according to Xanthopoulou and colleagues (2009) self-efficacy, a factor of academic optimism, had a positive correlation with work engagement. Therefore, the aforementioned findings suggested potential relationships among these constructs.

6. School size as moderator

School size has a profound influence on every actor in school both on personal and interpersonal level and also school outcomes. Many studies concluded that a small school, in general, has more advantage over a large school particularly in teachers’ sense of responsibility and belonging (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009) and interpersonal relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Additionally, Leithwood and Jantzi (2009) found that school size was the most frequently used moderator in school research. However, due to inconclusive findings, further study was suggested regarding the moderating effect of school size.

7. Basis for conceptual model

Pragmatically, during the educational reform age in Thailand where accountability for student outcome is the main focus. The roles and responsibilities of a school leader have been under scrutiny from all involved parties, particularly from the eyes of teachers and parents. It is no denying that motivating teachers to perform their best is a vital job of a principal. Since both teachers’ academic optimism and work engagement are two of the most desirable
traits in teachers, it is important to find out whether an authentic principal can induce such qualities in teachers. From positive psychology perspectives, it is sensible that the premise is achievable but school size also plays a big role in how interpersonal relationships function. Therefore, the proposed model (see fig.1) could potentially help support further study and improvement of the relationships within a school. Academically, this conceptual model is the first that explores the relationship among authentic leadership, teachers’ academic optimism and teachers’ work engagement. It also followed the recommendation by Avolio and Mhatre (2011) that future research topics concerning authentic leadership should focus on the moderating and mediating relationships in order to better understand how authentic leadership influences an organization. Lastly, the framework with moderating effect of school size should help explain the role of school size in school actors’ relationships.

8. Future research initiatives

The proposed conceptual model provided several potential topics for future research. First of all, for research and development, the conceptual framework may provide a practical direction to initiate a policy to enhance teachers’ academic optimism and work engagement by educating and preparing a principal to become a more authentic leader. Secondly, a quantitative study utilizing structural equation modelling with the current model or expanded one with additional variables of interest. In a case of adding a dependent variable, teachers’ academic optimism and work engagement may act as mediating variables. More advanced quantitative studies may include both mediating and moderating effects in the model as well. Besides, by applying a multi-level modelling, a study about the effect of authentic leadership may be done on both academic optimism and work engagement of a group of teachers as a collective construct. Finally, a mixed method study which includes a qualitative phase may be incorporated into a study to further clarify the relationships among the main variables.

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to thank Chulalongkorn University Graduate School Thesis Grant for funding this research.

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research, 79(1), 464-490.


