PAPER SUMMARY

The Relationship Between Organisation Culture and Leadership Style in Technical and Vocational Schools in the United Arab Emirates

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This paper summary discusses the results of an on-going research that examines the relationship between organisation culture and leadership style in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These schools are characterised by a multicultural environment where teachers and principals come from different countries around the world and students are UAE nationals. The research explored two main questions:

1) How is the style of leadership perceived in these schools, in terms of Burns' (1978) transactional and transforming styles? The experiences and views of both principals and teachers were examined.

2) What is the influence of school leadership on the organisational culture in UAE TVET schools?

Throughout the past thirty years, research on school leadership has provided indications of a relationship between school effectiveness and the role of the school principal in a number of countries (e.g. Fullan, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Huber & West, 2002; Leithwood et. al., 2004). Organisational culture is recognised as one of the important factors that influence leadership, and leadership also influences culture (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Deal & Peterson, 2009, Schein, 2010). TVET schools in the UAE are fairly new and no previous research has been done on organisational culture.

This study was guided by the interpretive framework of organisation culture, symbolism, and aesthetics (Hatch & Yanow, in Tsoukas & Knudsen 2003), and was based on a sequential mixed method approach (Creswell, 2009) that initiated with the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Riggio, 2006), to identify transactional and transformational leadership styles. This was then followed by a set of qualitative methods that include observations, interviews, and document analysis to decipher the organisational culture of selected schools using Schein's model (Schein, 2010).

The quantitative data were collected using the MLQ developed by Bass and Avolio (2004). The short form of this questionnaire, the MLQ (5X-short) was used in this study. It contains 45 items that cover nine element of leadership. The questionnaire included two forms, the first is the 'leader form' where the principal self-assessed him/herself, and the second is the 'rater form' where the vice principals and teachers completed. Data were then analysed using the MLQ manual (Avolio & Bass, 2004) that provides a scoring key to rate items and group them according to a scale. Averages by scale were calculated and then results were analysed to determine the level of transactional and transformational leadership and how it compares to international and national norms. Two principals, two vice principals, and thirty teachers participated in this study.

Several artifacts were examined; these included the school mission and vision, organisation charts and policy documents on academic governance. A centralized directorate manages TVET schools in the UAE and therefore the Directorate issues these documents.

Results showed that according to teachers' perceptions, both transactional and transformational leadership are almost equally practiced. However, when comparing the results with international normative samples, both styles of leadership are below the norm. Also, comparing these results with a study done in the UAE in 34 general education schools where around 490 teachers completed the MLQ (Ibrahim & Al-Taneiji, 2013), transactional and transformational leadership were once again below the averages obtained from the general education schools.

Passive/avoidant leadership style, on the other hand, appeared to be higher than the international norms. The outcome of leadership, which measures extra effort, effectiveness of leaders, as well as the general satisfaction of the followers, also showed that it is below the international norm.

Policies that govern decision making in schools showed a rather centralized context. School principals contribute to decision making through committees that meet frequently. However, the final decisions are discussed and approved by a Board, which then issues a directive and circulates it among school leaders.

Schools are complex organizations and are influenced by the societal culture, which Walker and Dimmock consider the context in which educational administration and leadership should be studied (Walker & Dimmock, 2002). Therefore, understanding leadership in this context can be rather complicated especially for TVET schools in the UAE, due to their multicultural nature.

Societies such as the Arabic, Japanese, Korean and Chinese are considered to be collectivist societies as opposed to the United States individualistic society, where transactional and transformational leadership originally initiated. In collectivist societies, there is a shared responsibility between leaders and followers that readily enables transformational leadership. In the case of UAE TVET schools, the society is collectivist, however, the principals of the schools and some teachers come from individualistic societies.

National Culture influences the organisation and leadership style. Gardenswartz and Rowe (In Silverthorne, 2005) identified five major areas that are important to consider in organisations that are functioning across cultures: hierarchy and status, group versus individual orientation, time consciousness, communication styles and pattern and conflict resolution (p.2). The behaviour of managers (or school principals) is therefore influenced by the National culture. This can be one major reason why leadership style exhibited almost equal levels of transactional and transformational leadership.

This leads to further ways in which Western leadership models can be modified and adapted in UAE vocational schools.

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