



Illuminating the core of Singapore school leadership preparation

Singapore school leadership

Two decades of in-service experience

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433

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine distinctive features that have surfaced in school leadership development programmes for more than two decades in Singapore.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on information gathered from existing literature and the author's involvement in the programmes.

Findings – The Diploma in Educational Administration (DEA) programme and the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP), offered by the National Institute of Education of the Nanyang Technological University, primarily adopted the mentoring model and innovation model respectively. Irrespective of the models, evidence is provided to illuminate the co-creation approach as well as synergy with the schools and Ministry of Education that permeate both programmes.

Practical implications – Instead of discarding the past as obsolete, it is suggested that programme developers take cognizance of local distinctive features in leadership preparatory programmes and capitalize their strengths, in their attempts to generate the next wave of seascape change.

Originality/value – Provides pertinent aspects of experience over a period of more than two decades of school leadership preparation in Singapore that could be of useful reference to practitioners and researchers in the field.

Keywords Schools, Singapore, Leadership development

Paper type General review

Introduction

The centrality of the principal's role has been reiterated by numerous writers (for instance, Fullan *et al.*, 2006; Hallinger, 1992; Lane, 1992). This is in congruence with a key finding in research (Bolam *et al.*, 1993; Mortimore *et al.*, 1988; Rutter *et al.*, 1979).

In relation to the above, the learning of school leaders has been in focus both locally and overseas. Reports on school management emphasis on the highly significant role of the headteachers and their preparation for leadership roles (Lim, 2005; *Developing School Management* (HMSO, 1990); *Improving The Preparation Of School Administrators* (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1989); *Towards Excellence In Schools* (Ministry of Education, 1987).

With regard to school leadership preparation in Singapore, it was in the year 2001 that a new school leadership program, the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP), was launched. It replaced the Diploma in Educational Administration (DEA) program at the National Institute of Education of the Nanyang Technological University, which had been in existence since 1984. Both full-time programmes served to formally prepare promising vice-principals of Singapore for school leadership. While leadership mentoring was the highlight of DEA, the concept of innovation permeates LEP. Table I illustrates the two models.



Relevant background

Through the years of minor reviews of on-going programmes, there has always been the quest for improvement. The conservation of co-creation is reflected in the DEA mode of daily mentor-protégé reflective sessions and the LEP mode of regular syndicate leader-members sessions. In sum, there is conservation of what is valued and could be perennial, the co-creation of knowledge. The relevant background on DEA is provided below.

Leadership mentoring was the prime aspect of a managerial development strategy for aspiring school principals attending the DEA programme. The one-academic-year programme integrated mentoring with formal instruction given by faculty members who also facilitated the school attachment component. For eight weeks during school attachment, each DEA participant was paired with a school principal who served as a mentor to the participant. The mentors of the DEA were carefully selected by the Ministry of Education as worthy role models for aspiring school principals.

Literature has surfaced the existence of some relationship that could be developed in mentoring (Barnett, 1990; Daresh and Playko, 1989; Kram, 1988). The phases for the development of the mentor-protégé relationship that were identified by Walker *et al.* (1993) are as follows: formal, cautious, sharing, open, and beyond phases. There appeared to be some progression in the relationship from the formal phase of performing routine tasks and of feeling uncertain and apprehensive, through the cautious, sharing, and open phases marked by increasing trust and confidence between mentors and protégés, and to the final beyond phase of open professional discussion between mentor and protégé in friendship maintained on their own initiatives after the school attachment component of the DEA program.

The phases of mentor-protégé relationship identified in Singapore are similar to those reported by studies done elsewhere. For instance, entry, mutual building of trust, risk taking, teaching of skills, professional standards and dissolution phases (Bova and Phillips, 1984); telling, role-modelling, mutual participation, delegation and self-direction phases (Gray and Gray, 1985); as well as initiation, cultivation, separation and redefinition phases (Kram, 1988).

Distinct from the above-mentioned models, the concepts of friendship and mutual learning or learning from one another for mutual benefit and collaboration were explicit features of the Singapore model of mentoring. The DEA mentors associated mentoring with the four descriptors of “peer support”, “collaboration”, “mutual/reciprocal learning” and “coaching” (Coleman *et al.*, 1996). There was “growth of trust and friendship” over the period of structured mentoring; learning was the “greatest benefit” for protégés, and mentors “learned a great deal” in Singapore. Walker *et al.* (1993) reported that the mentors and protégés in Singapore felt as if they had become friends and mutual trust seemed to exist in the open and beyond phases. Both benefited from reciprocal learning. Mentors in Singapore felt that having a protégé broadened their own knowledge, sharpened their skills and made them more

Table I.
DEA and LEP models

	DEA	LEP
Mode	In-service	In-service
Participation	Full-time	Full-time
Duration	One academic year	Six months
School attachment	Mentoring	Innovation

aware of how and why they did things in specific ways. The exploration of such Singapore school co-creation of knowledge in the relationship process is elaborated below. leadership

Co-creation of knowledge

Such generation of knowledge in co-creating, within the formal leadership preparatory programme as indicated above, was further explored by Lim (2005). Learning relationships at work, featuring friendship, collaboration and mutual learning, emerged among school principals in Singapore as a consequence of leadership mentoring in the formal mentor-protégé relationships. There was active networking for learning relationships at work among fellow principals. These principals created, seized and improved through learning from unstructured learning relationships at work. The former school leadership preparation programme that the principals attended emerged as a strong breeding ground for the initiation of such learning relationships.

In co-creating knowledge, the relevance and significance of relationships permeated the Singapore experience in mentoring (Lim and Low, 2004). In particular, the practice of leading (in relating with people, providing direction and setting expectations, consulting and developing ownership of decisions, trusting and empowering, and acting visibly) surfaced prominently in leadership mentoring (Lim, 2005, p. 31). As such, learning relationship at work could define a Singapore concept of mentoring and provide a form of continuous workplace learning as the principals in times of change and expanding corpus of information.

Further, educational developments in Singapore advocate relationship skills. "People our Focus" (BlueSky, 2003, pp. 13, 14) was officially pronounced as a corporate value of the Singapore education system, encompassing the statement of "we value people, seeking to bring out the best in everyone" in "having and showing care and concern; serving people with sincerity", "seeing the potential of each person and helping each to develop and succeed", "building a team and recognising that everyone has a part to play in the organisation" and "respecting people with backgrounds or views different from ours".

Mentoring traditionally serves as education of the less learned from the more learned. The Singapore experience reveals that it has since extended beyond such confines to co-creating knowledge in learning relationships that have features of friendship, coloration and mutual learning. Relationships are subjected to change and a good match between the parties concerned could enhance the success of the endeavor. While the DEA programme adopted a one-to-one mentor-protégé match, LEP adopts a team approach. Consistent with emphasis on the choice of mentors (for example, Carruthers, 1988; Yeap *et al.*, 2005), the choice of LEP syndicate leaders and their role in facilitating learning and co-creating knowledge among various participants is of prime importance. The team of syndicate leaders comprises faculty staff at the National Institute of Education of the Nanyang Technological University. Functions of the syndicate are wide-ranging, inclusive of mutual support, discussions to integrate seemingly discrete ideas and debates on current issues of concern (LEP, 2006). The key component of the DEA programme was mentoring while the LEP is that of the syndicate to "intensifying the learning" in an "intensive learning relationship" between the syndicate leader as well as among fellow participants (LEP, 2006, p. 10). In essence, the aspect of co-creating knowledge involving learning relationships is a common thread that binds the DEA and LEP.

Synergy with the schools cum Ministry of Education

The seemingly on-going process of education reform in Singapore could be reflected in the annual workplan seminars for all school leaders, officers from the Ministry of Education, and invited guests from tertiary institutions, and exemplified in policy emphases such as IT Masterplan in Education 1997; National Education 1997; Thinking Schools, Learning Nation 1997; MOE Curriculum Review 1997; Desired Outcomes of Education 1998; Developing Thinking Schools: A Strategic Perspective on Education for the 21st Century 1999; Toward Ability-Driven Education 1999; School Excellence Model 2000; IT Masterplan II 2002; Innovation and Enterprise 2003; Teach Less Learn More 2004; Touching Hearts, and Engaging Minds: Preparing our Learners for Life 2005.

In relation to the above, school leaders in Singapore are ranked annually and they are held accountable for all key aspects of school matters, with “roles and responsibilities” defined as follows: “leadership, strategic planning and administration, and management of staff, students and resources” (*Principals’ Handbook* (Ministry of Education, 2006)). The handbook is a guide to all school leaders, issued by the Ministry of Education, and made available to all education officers via the ministry intranet. To a certain extent, the pressure on school leaders in Singapore is akin to those experienced by counterparts elsewhere, in meeting accountability expectations (Billot, 2002), to the extent that the ministry is reviewing areas of the principal’s duties that can be offloaded to other appointment holders like the administration manager, operations manager and vice principal.

With such emphasis on accountability, it has been inevitable that the preparation of school leaders be deemed important. Implementation of the DEA and LEP programmes encompasses the direct involvement of the National Institute of Education as well as the schools and Ministry of Education in repeated yearly cycles over a sustained period for more than two decades. The Singapore Ministry of Education recruits potential school leaders for the DEA and LEP participants of the National Institute of Education, and the participants are attached to schools for a substantial period in the course of their headship preparatory programme. The financial sponsorship in terms of full-pay as well as opportunity of time in terms of full-time in-service learning, are distinctive features of both the DEA and LEP programmes. This financial sponsorship is in congruence with the “government’s commitment to human capital development” (Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 2002b) that as a small nation, Singapore has “invested heavily” in people, in a quest to “continue to thrive and prosper in an uncertain world” (Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 2002a).

The financial support also includes the international component of the LEP programme whereby each team of participants in the same cohort visit a different country. The participants, facilitated by their tutor and accompanied by a ministry nominated principal from school, seek to understand aspects of leadership and innovation beyond the shores of Singapore. Beyond the intra-team sharing, there is also structured inter-team exchange of information in the form of team presentations and reports upon their return from the international trips. All expenses incurred for the international component of the LEP programme are undertaken by the Singapore Ministry of Education.

Void of any official position and responsibilities, participants of the school leadership preparation programmes are offered the opportunities of time and space to focus on the exploration and consolidation of learning. Such synergy with the schools and ministry provides the LEP faculty staff sufficient space to focus on the

professional aspects of the programme and be free from the shackles of issues pertaining to recruitment, funding and placement of participants before, during and after the in-service programme.

Creating the next wave of seascape change

After more than two decades of conception and delivery of school leadership preparation, it is apt to re-ascertain future direction in times of on-going change. It is inevitable that the Institute of Education, being the sole tertiary school leadership preparation institute in Singapore, moves ahead in its school leadership preparation for the future.

In Singapore, mentoring research indicates behavioural norm of principalship practice that encourages the continual creation of learning. The attachment-school principals in the former DEA programme served as mentors to participants in the programme. There is a lack of evidence to prove that the DEA mentors were not innovative in their approach and their protégés were denied opportunities to learn innovatively. In contrast, it has been reported that in DEA, the participant protégés presented case studies of incidents in the mentor's schools during review meetings organised by the facilitators of the program, and "through these presentations they learnt how different school leaders worked and how the various mentors tackled problems in innovative ways" (Low, 2001, p. 33). The learning relationships could help both mentor and protégé perceive matters innovatively.

In the current LEP, the role of the attachment-school principal is that of "investing" in the participant's "development in innovation" as the participant "should produce marketable results for the school" (LEP, 2006, p. 7). The focus of LEP is on preparing school leaders for tomorrow who are able to innovate as they lead, as they work in contexts characterised by uncertainty and rapid change.

The focus on change and innovation does not contradict highlights of research findings on leadership mentoring in Singapore that indicate the pervasive impact in generating learning. The concerns that mentoring may not be contributing to critical reflective leadership but passing on conservative role assumptions and practices (for instance, Southworth, 1995) could not be substantiated as the findings reveal otherwise. Leadership mentoring in Singapore has transcended the "traditional apprentice models ('this is what I always do, so you should do the same')" (Daresh, 1995, p. 14). Effective mentoring gives confidence to protégés in a period of change and uncertainty (Bush and Coleman, 1995; Lim, 2005).

Further, there has also been a recent focus on the development of system-wide "structured mentoring programme, with a strong school-based mentoring component" in order for beginning teachers with the "necessary guidance and en-culture them in the ethos and values of the profession" (*Touching Hearts, Engaging Mind*, (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 12)). With the impending pervasiveness of mentoring cascading from the level of school leadership preparation to the induction of beginning teachers, the systemic impact of mentoring could be extended. In view of the above, the integration of the key foci of innovation and mentoring, in LEP and DEA respectively, could possibly be explored.

Conclusion

Mentoring as a concept and a practice in Singapore encapsulates quintessentially the prime elements of learning and relationships, in featuring friendship, collaboration and mutual learning. Tapping on this uniqueness renders the co-creation of knowledge

feasible in the evolution of school leadership programmes. In local contexts, synergy with the schools and Ministry of Education helps to facilitate the process. More than two decades of school leadership research and practice suggest the capitalisation of such core aspects, as programme developers ride beyond the existing wave and create the next wave of seascape change.

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