Against the Odds: Leadership Practices of a Redeployed Principal in a Challenging Urban Context in China

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Abstract

This paper reports a study of how a redeployed principal with a successful leadership record enacted her leadership in a low performing urban Chinese state school. China has developed a policy of redeploying successful principals to under-performing schools. The principal was sampled purposively and data were collected by means of a questionnaire survey to staff, semi-structured interviews with the principal and fifteen staff, documents and field notes. The findings show that the turnaround school “thrive”, with the principal’s philosophy, qualities, values and strategies as a servant leader differentiating her from the frequently advocated transformational and instructional leadership styles. They suggest that servant leadership is likely to be a viable leadership style in schools, facing comparable challenging circumstances, especially in China, although it is not possible to generalize from a single case.

Proposal

This paper will report a study of how a redeployed principal with a successful leadership record enacted her leadership in a low performing urban Chinese state school.

Redeploying successful principals to under-performing schools is a developing global trend. Research on principal leadership in challenging, disadvantaged, low-performing schools across the globe has shown the significant direct and indirect influence of principal leadership on student academic outcomes and holistic development. Successful principal leadership, often conceptualized as
transformational leadership, instructional leadership, or a combination of the two, have been discussed theoretically and empirically.

China has developed a policy of redeploying successful principals to under-performing schools. This paper will report findings from one such case in Beijing, China. The principal was sampled purposively and data were collected by means of a questionnaire survey to staff, semi-structured interviews with the principal and fifteen staff, documents and field notes.

The findings show that the turnaround school “thrived”, with the principal’s philosophy, qualities, values and strategies as a servant leader differentiating her from the frequently advocated transformational and instructional leadership styles. In this case, three distinct attributes, which include the principal’s overarching “to serve” philosophy, altruistically setting staff’s needs and wellbeing first rather than acting as a leader, and leading her senior and middle leaders to be servants in their respective roles in order to support teaching and learning, made the principal more likely to enact a servant leadership style. Servant leadership, with its Christian genesis, has been investigated mostly in western business contexts, or in faith schools. Literature on servant leadership in China is scarce, so this paper provides a significant contribution to an under-researched phenomenon in this context. The findings from this study suggest that servant leadership is likely to be a viable leadership style in schools, facing comparable challenging circumstances, and aiming to be turned around successfully, especially in China, although it is not possible to generalize from a single case.

This paper fits the conference theme by examining a globally significant issue, redeployment of successful principals to under-performing schools, to the specific context of China.