The Relationship between Principal's Leadership Style and Teachers' Work Engagement in Hainan, China during COVID-19

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Abstract: Rethinking the impact of principals' leadership styles on teachers' engagement especially during the Covid-19 is an extremely important subject in education. The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of principals' leadership style on teachers' work engagement in high schools in Hainan Province, using quantitative analysis and administering the MLQ questionnaire and UWES questionnaire to 450 teachers from 113 high schools in Hainan Province. The results of the study showed that principals of high schools in Hainan Province generally showed transactional leadership style, teachers had higher work engagement during the epidemic, and the transactional leadership style of principals had a positive effect on teachers' engagement.

Keywords: Principal's Leadership; Teachers' Engagement; Educational Leadership

1. Introduction

So far, China and the world are still facing a huge disaster - COVID-19. Undoubtedly, education is an essential component of a country's economic development, and the school principal as the most central leadership role in schools cannot be ignored. The covid-19 has created a new dilemma for principals, who not only need to understand the profound impact of the New Coronary Pneumonia outbreak on their students, but also need to exercise leadership to properly guide and develop relevant emergency policies and guidelines, and how to get teachers to accept and understand these policy guidelines is also necessary[1]. The same is true for teachers, as the sudden explosion of online learning models forces teachers to undertake a different workload and changeable teaching style than in the past, including teachers' psychological counselling to students, teachers' use of and training in distance learning software, teachers' reflection on online teaching and learning, and their ability to respond to unexpected situations. The various difficulties and challenges make principals realize that their own proper leadership and active teacher engagement are necessary to ensure the smooth operation of the school during this special time, and as Ayeshah & Yasser [2] point out, spirito leadership by principals can increase teacher engagement and have a positive impact on teachers' teaching and learning. When teachers are under the inspiring leadership of the principal, they can vigorously engage in teaching and then students naturally feel the enthusiasm of the teachers[3]. This is the rationale of this research, based on the findings of previous studies, to explore in depth the relationship between principal leadership and teacher job engagement during COVID-19, to provide some theoretical support and reference for teachers and to provide some reference for principals to improve job satisfaction during this special period. Based on a search of CNKI, China's largest academic website, only a total of 12 papers discussed the relationship between principal leadership and teachers. In related studies over the past two decades, scholars have found that teachers are a high-stress profession who are at constant risk of burnout[4], and that job stress, job satisfaction, and health are not optimistic[5]. In this dire situation, where the state of the teaching profession is a concern, it is even more urgent and important to explore the relationship between principals and teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Principal's Leadership Style (PLS)

The definition of leadership is not uniform; academics generally agree that leadership refers to the ability of a leader to guide and influence individuals or groups to achieve common goals under specific conditions[6], as demonstrated by the process by which a person exerts influence on individuals or groups

in an organization to facilitate their achievement of goals [7]. The four characteristics of an outstanding leader are "sharing a vision, leading by example, inspiring subordinates, and making subordinates want to follow" [8]. Using the Chinese educational context as a context to define the principal, the high school principal in this paper, as the highest leader in school management, has the supreme authority to manage the internal and external decision-making and management authority of the school.

Most scholars' research on principal leadership is based on the theoretical framework of management, and its theoretical development is roughly divided into four stages: first is the major trait theory,which focuses on the temperament and personality traits of leaders, Komariah[9]found in their study of the leadership styles of elementary school principals from different regions that principals with good qualities principals contribute the most to the development of schools; second is the major leadership behaviors theory, which mainly focuses on the leadership styles and approaches of principals, and Sancar [10]found that the most essential leadership competencies principals need to have are performing functions and caring for staff through a principal leadership style survey using a typical leadership behavior description questionnaire; third is the major power change theory, which is a framework that emphasizes that leadership styles vary with different environments and change; and fourth, major transformational and transactional leadership theories, The theory has been widely used in research on principal leadership styles and is considered to be a very effective leadership style that has a direct impact on teacher performance [5][11].

2.2 Teacher Work Engagement (TWE)

The term "engagement" refers to "emotional involvement or commitment" and implies that the employee is committed, dedicated, enthusiastic and focused on the work task; Kahn[12]argued that work engagement means that the employee remains active, energetic and focused the typical theoretical framework widely used to measure WE comes from Schaufeli[13], who classifies WE into three dimensions: focus, energy, and devotion, it be named UWES (The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale). Vitality refers to the energy that employees put into their work scenarios, focus refers to the fact that employees are so fully engaged in their work that they forget the passage of time, and dedication refers to the value and meaning that employees experience in the work process.

2.3 Teachers' work engagement and principal's leadership style

There have been many studies to explore the relationship between PLS and TWE[3], such as Alazmi [2]studied the effect of authentic leadership by principals on teacher engagement in a Kuwaiti educational context and showed a significant positive relationship, with principals in Kuwait actively demonstrating authentic leadership that enhances teachers' self-efficacy and thus teacher engagement. Alazmi collected from 450 teachers using PAL questionnaire and found that authentic leadership by principals promoted teacher engagement through glucocorticoids. Sehgal et al. administered a questionnaire to 575 secondary school teachers and analyzed the data through SEM-PLS and found a positive collaborative association between principal leadership and teacher self-efficacy. Once teachers' self-efficacy is enhanced, it naturally enhances teachers' engagement in their work. However, in addition to the above studies, Saleem et al.[14] noted that dedicated principals had a disruptive effect on classroom organization and teacher leadership, but a positive effect on instructional planning and classroom climate, and that teachers' instructional planning and classroom organization were stronger when principals exhibited directive and supportive leadership styles. Among these many related studies, transformational and transactional leadership is the main focus in the field of educational management research. Balyer and Isamil et al. noted that principals' transformational and transactional leadership have a direct impact on teacher performance and affective commitment and suggested that principals need to implement transformational leadership styles to increase teacher commitment [11].

In summary, in the field of education, scholars have explored the impact of different leadership styles, such as transactional leadership and transformational leadership, on teacher performance and organizational commitment, and it can be seen that the relationship between these variables is reciprocal, but there is little research on the relationship between principal leadership and teacher commitment especially in China.

3. Methodology

This study uses two measurement instruments with high credibility and validity that have been widely

accepted: one is the PLS questionnaire scale (Principal Leadership Style Measure, includes four leadership styles, transactional, transformational, Laissez-faire leadership, totally 21 items) from Bath; and the other is the UWES (Work Engagement Scale, includes vigor, concentration, devotion, totally 17 items). Based on the official data from the Chinese Ministry of Education 2020, I distributed 450 questionnaires to 9,599 randomly distributed high school teachers in Haikou, China, by means of a questionnaire to study the current situation of principals' leadership style and teachers' work engagement and their relationship in high schools in Hainan Province, China, and to conduct a comparative analysis of the current situation of teachers' work engagement in different types and levels. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.956, which is an acceptable standard. Meanwhile, to prove the research significance of the survey data, validity analysis of the data collected by MLQ and UWES was conducted, and the results showed that the commonality values of all research items were greater than 0.4, indicating that the extraction of information from the research items was valid. After that, this study analyzed the data from the collected questionnaires, mainly using SPSS 11.5 for basic statistical analysis, exploratory factor analysis and typical correlation analysis, and Lisrel 8.30 structural equation software for validation factor analysis. And the final interpretation of the results was carried out.

4. Findings

Research Question 1: What are the common leadership styles of high school principals in Hainan Province during covid-19?

A comprehensive analysis of the scores on the MLQ scale for each element revealed the highest scoring transactional leadership factor, which indicates that during the epidemic, the most common leadership style exhibited by high school principals in Haikou was transactional leadership, and they more often asked their subordinates to follow the rules and follow school regulations to ensure the stable operation of the school during the epidemic; in addition, Haikou principals also often exerted their humanistic concern, which can be seen in the teachers' desire for the principals' humanistic concern during the epidemic. The majority of teachers surveyed felt that principals regularly instructed them on work guidelines and stressed the importance of school rules, and assigned teachers to complete basic job duties; however, 183 of the 414 teachers surveyed strongly hoped that principals would help teachers increase their self-worth and lead them to see their work in a new light. This shows that principals in Haikou are more concerned with task completion rates and top-down bureaucratic style of rule.

In conclusion, the common high school's principal leadership style in Haikou city is transactional leadership.

Research Question 2: What was the level of teacher work engagement during the outbreak?

In a descriptive analysis of the 414 UWES questionnaires, we found that the mean value of each dimension was at 3.640, which was higher than the theoretical mean3 but did not reach the highest level of engagement.4 Therefore, I believe that the engagement of teachers in Haikou City during the epidemic was in the middle to upper range.

Research question 3: What is the relationship between PLS and TWE among high school principals in Hainan Province during the epidemic?

To explore the correlation between the two variables, this study used linear regression to find that the leadership style of principals was significantly correlated with teachers' work engagement. Data analysis showed that the correlation coefficient value between MLQ and UWES was 0.851, which showed significance at the 0.01 level, indicating that the independent variable PLS of the study was positively correlated with the dependent variable TWE. Specifically, the correlation coefficients were 0.752, 0.838, and 0.823, respectively, which implies a positive relationship between transformational leadership and vitality, dedication, and focus. Transactional leadership was significantly correlated with vitality, dedication, and focus all with coefficient values of 0.694, 0.827, and 0.821, respectively, with correlation coefficient values greater than 0, indicating a positive relationship between transactional leadership and vitality, dedication, and focus. On the surface of the overall data, it is clear that transformational and transactional leadership has a significant positive impact on faculty engagement. However, surprisingly,laissez-faire leadership had no significant impact on this. But, Laissez-faire leadership has a positive impact in devotion for teacher.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, the most common leadership style of high school principals in Hainan Province during the epidemic was transactional leadership, teachers' engagement during the epidemic was moderate to high, and transactional and transformational leadership had a more positive impact on teachers' performance. The system adopted by most schools in China is the principal responsibility system. At the same time, due to the Chinese social system, principals exhibit more of a bureaucratic management style, so they will tend to emphasize tasks and rewards and punishments more, just as in China, schools will have title selection activities appear, and teachers' titles are linked to their teaching achievements. So it is not surprising that transactional leadership is more common. On the other hand, the sudden outbreak of the new crown pneumonia epidemic has undoubtedly brought new challenges to teachers, especially since they have to show a high level of commitment during the epidemic as they have taken on more responsibilities than in the past, such as the safety of students at home, paying attention to students, communicating government orders in a timely manner, and cooperating with the epidemic prevention and control, etc. Teachers have had to devote themselves to such a large amount of work even if they did not want to. Notably, although the study showed that laissez-faire leadership did not significantly affect on teacher engagement, the style did work on teacher commitment, which reminds us that in some cases, principals need to shift their leadership style depending on the context in order to promote better teacher productivity and professional development in the specific context. Principals must demonstrate a humanistic attitude toward their staff to reassure them in the face of COVID-19 and stressed school employees. Clark mentioned that women are more likely to be negatively affected by COVID-19 in terms of mental health, negative emotional experiences, and therefore, principals can then be more caring for women during such a special time[15]. However, this study also found that only four teachers indicated that they were willing to stay with their principals at all times and trust them completely. This also reflects that most teachers do not fully trust their leaders, due to the authority and alienation established by the leader.

Overall, the transformational leadership style had a positive impact on TWE. This type of leader actively provides proper guidance to subordinates, provides personalized care to teachers, and creates a harmonious and cohesive organizational climate, which was one of the most important management styles during the New Crown Pneumonia epidemic. Such a leader ensures that organizational goals are achieved and brings a sense of trust and harmony to employees. I would also like to offer some management suggestions for school leaders to consider: (1) First, principals should always keep learning and develop a vision. The epidemic is beyond our ability to predict, and in such an era of VUCA, especially as China's middle and high school education curriculum reform and school changes continue to evolve and deepen, principals must always maintain learning and a profound vision. Second, principals need to give teachers enough trust and some management authority to enhance their effectiveness and professional development. For example, teachers have more say in teaching than principals, so principals can then provide teachers with the opportunity to develop new teaching and lecturing styles, and teachers feel motivated to devote themselves to work design after feeling autonomy.

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