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Indicators of ethical leadership for school principals in Thailand

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Abstract

This study was aimed at developing ethical leadership indicators for school principals, in Thailand, by examining consistent with the confirmatory factor analysis, the empirical data of the “goodness of fit” of the structural relationship model. There were two groups of research samples involved in this study, namely: seven educational experts; and 826 schools. They were chosen by utilizing the multi-staged random sampling technique. The instruments used were interview questions and a questionnaire. The results showed that ethical leadership was composed of five primary factors; 19 secondary factors; and 69 indicators. The affecting factors were ranked in descending order. These were responsibility; fairness; trust; disposition; and empowerment respectively. There were 13 indicators related to responsibility; 11 indicators associated with fairness; 17 indicators connected to trust; 15 indicators linked to disposition; and 13 indicators related to empowerment. These findings had implications for Thailand’s educational institutions since, in the last decade, they had failed to develop ethical values amongst the younger generation. This might have been due to the rapid pace of modernization.

Keywords: Ethical leadership; “goodness of fit”; structural relationship model

1. Introduction

In many countries, globalization highlighted the importance of education and brought with it an intense interest in the quality of education. It was believed strongly that empowering the schools would lead to better administration and student achievement (Keawdeang, 2003). From this perspective, leadership was found to be a critical factor in developing the quality of students and successful schools (Somprach, 2003; Kinney, 2008; Yan & Ehrich, 2009).

Thailand's Tenth National Economic and Social Development (2007-2011) had a vision of a 'Green and Happy Society'. Therefore, an emphasis, on the role of ethics, was highlighted in everything from family relationships to sustainable use of natural resources. This emphasis was made explicit first in the National Education Act 1999 which was revised in 2002. The National Education Act’s intention was to promote ethical...
administration and pedagogy. Consequently, there was acceptance that the concept of ethical leadership began with ethical leaders (Somprach, 2003; Pongsriwat, 2008). In the Thai context, it was argued that ethical administration and pedagogy meant that every student would receive the best possible education which could be provided in any particular context. In turn, this suggested that there would be constant attention on the quality of administration and pedagogy (Whitaker, 1993; Somprach, 2003).

2. Statement of the problem

From the indicators perspective, ethical understandings and practices were the most important indicators of sustainable organizational success. However, in the past decade, educational institutions had not been very successful in developing ethical values amongst the younger Thai generation. This was no doubt that this was due partially to the rapid pace of modernization.

Educational reform, in Thailand, had focused on the principal or director as a key person in making the changes and developing the school. It was the principal’s or the director’s fundamental role to develop his/her school as an ethical and democratic society (Sergiovanni, 1992; The Office of National Education Commission, 2002; Beckner, 2004). Principals or directors needed to understand and to practice concepts such as justice; freedom; human rights; and responsibility. They provided a model for staff and students to follow. However, a past study, related to Thai principals, indicated that, in their understanding and practice of ethical leadership, most of them were no better than 'Fair' (Ministry of Education, 2003). Definitely, there was considerable room for improvement (Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2005).

Sergiovanni (2001) suggested a three-part approach to consider how this improvement might be achieved: namely, the heart; the head; and the hand. The heart referred to personal beliefs and values whereas the head referred to an individual’s understanding of how the world worked. Finally the hand was a metaphor for decisions; actions; and behaviours. However, there were major problems arising immediately from the idea of principals or directors as leaders of ethical organizations. How did principals or directors vary on factors such as their understanding of ethical leadership; and commitment (over time and context) to ethical principles and practices? In other words, the question was how could their understanding and commitment to ethical leadership be assessed?

Although some studies, of ethical leadership, had been carried out in other countries (Foster, 1994), however, no date, there were none in Thailand. Therefore, there was a logical starting point to advance one's knowledge of ethical leadership. Without such research, there would be no evidence-based means of assessing the relationship between the policy and practice (Somprach, 2005; The Office of Educational Accreditation and Quality Standards, 2005). Furthermore, there was not only no research on ethical leadership in Thai schools but, also, no researcher, in Thailand, had developed a model of ethical leadership. As such, there was little, if any, record of attempts to assess ethical leadership behaviour.

More specifically, the following statements were sought to be answered:

- What were the indicators of ethical leadership of school principals in Thailand?
- What empirical “goodness of fit” of data existed in relation to a structural model of ethical leadership?

3. Research objectives

This research’s objectives were to:
(a) Explore how indicators of ethical leadership, by Thailand’s school principals, could be developed;
(b) Examine the empirical data’s goodness of fit with a structural model of ethical leadership.

4. Research methodology
A total of 826 elementary and secondary schools were drawn from the 31,770 schools overall. The instrument, used to collect the data was a 69-item Likert scale. Nine experts examined the quality of the instrument in order to determine its apparent congruence and the validity of the content of its questions with operational definitions. Then, following their recommendations, the questions were refined and piloted in order to establish their reliability.

5. Findings

5.1. How could the understanding of and commitment to ethical leadership be assessed?

Having regard to the existing foreign literature (Greenfield, 1991; Foster, 1994; Berkowitz, 1997 and 1998; Pickett, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001; Moorhouse, 2002; Yukl, 2002; Fullan, 2003; Beckner, 2004; and Starrat, 2004), which was added to by the data, obtained from in-depth interviews through professional discussions with seven experts, who were academic experts, educational administrators and policy experts in the Ministry of Education, a structural model was developed and used in this research. Because of the fit with the existing literature and the academic experts’ consensus of, it was reasonable to assume that this process resulted in a coherent and defensible concept of ethical leadership (Sinlarat, 2009). Hence, it could be concluded that the five factor model was, on the face of it, valid. In addition, owing to the fact that all the five factors had a clear association with ethical leadership, it was reasonable to adopt these five factors as comprising a concept of ethical leadership.

Factor analysis of the data, collected with the Likert scale questionnaire, resulted in a model of five primary factors and 19 secondary factors. The five primary factors were responsibility; fairness; trust; disposition; and empowerment. The responsibility factor consisted of three secondary factors which were accountability (four indicators); pursuit of excellence (five indicators); and self-control (four indicators). The confidence levels, of .01 or better, applied to all the indicators in the model. Under responsibility, the best three indicators were: concern for teamwork and school outcomes; satisfaction and pride in the current state; and persistence in improving quality of work.

The next primary factor was fairness which comprised of three secondary factors derived from 11 indicators. The three secondary factors were distributive fairness; procedural fairness; and courage and liberty. The best three indicators were fairness and only decision making; fairness in resource distribution; and commitment to the maintenance of justice. This was followed by trust as one of the primary factors which included four secondary factors, namely, honesty; integrity; loyalty; and reliability. These were derived from 17 indicators. Furthermore, the three best indicators of trust were: respecting confidential information; commitment to promises; and making data and information freely available.

The fourth primary factor was disposition which had five secondary factors such as decision making using ethical reasoning; conduct consistent with good societal values (discipline; patience; economy; honesty; and persistence to success); quality management; caring; and good citizenship. These secondary factors were based on 15 indicators. The best three indicators were: behaviour based on a code of conduct; regulations and the law; self-discipline; and decision making based on moral principles.

The last primary factor was empowerment which had three secondary factors, namely, support and encouragement of opportunities to influence organizational objectives; adequate data and information; and knowledge management. These secondary factors were derived from 16 indicators. The best three indicators were: providing opportunities for everybody to participate in important and challenging tasks; providing adequate and effective information; and constant improvement in communication skills and information technology.
5.2. **The investigation of the model’s causal structural relationship consistent with the confirmatory factor analysis of the empirical data.**

The findings of confirmatory factor analysis, for model testing in 19 secondary factors, revealed that each indicator had a significant relationship at the level of .01. Furthermore, according to the confirmative factor analysis, it was found that each indicator had a significant value of in factor loading. In addition, the confirmative factor analysis indicated that all 69 indicators were integral to ethical leadership.

For the second order confirmatory factor analysis, for model testing of major factors in five indicators, there were positive values, ranked in order of factor loadings, from high to low. These were responsibility; fairness; trust; disposition; and empowerment respectively. The results showed that, in ethical leadership, the structural relationship model had construct validity (Chi-Square = 80.08, df = 61, p = 0.051, GFI = 0.99, AGFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.019).

6. **Discussion**

6.1. **The research**

This research was prepared for policy development. It was projected to be the fundamental basis for policies and practices assessing ethical leadership behaviours. The outcome, of the research, would be a useful model. The next step, in the research process was to establish the method of using the model. In particular, there required to be some consideration of the kind of index which would be most useful. In addition, the absolute 'scores' would be always controversial. Perhaps 'bands' would be less controversial and more useful. It might be, perhaps, that scores, of any kind, might not be needed. The resolution of this question was a research matter.

6.2. **Technical problems**

The relationship (if any) between ethical reasoning and ethical behavior was complex. In this study, it had to be assumed that ethical reasoning was an indicator of ethical behaviour. It was assumed, also, that the way, in which the school principals responded to the items in the questionnaire, would be the way in which they would respond to actual situations. This was a fundamental characteristic of studies which evaluated behaviour by assessing reasoning. Similarly, there was some argument about the actual wording of the indicators and the primary and secondary factors. Again, this was inherent in research which studied human values. As far as possible, the researchers used expert panels to reduce (and not eliminate) this effect.

Of course, there could be no claim that the five primary factors and 19 secondary factors made up the best possible model. Nevertheless the model, derived in this research, was, at the very least, consistent with every day and technical concepts of ethical behaviour. In addition, this study’s results suggested that all five primary factors and the 19 secondary factors had made a significant and successful contribution to the model.

If the model was to be used for practical purposes, some considerations needed to be taken into account in respect of the instrument’s 'response-load'. This study, based on the 69 items or indicators, suggested that the response-load, for the participants, was quite high. However, it might be that, for many purposes, 15 (5 factors by 3 indicators) items would be adequate. This was a practical matter which could be addressed in related research.

7. **Conclusion**

The research findings, regarding the assessment of ethical leadership, would be very useful in designing professional development programmes for the potential and incumbent principals. If such programmes had a considerable role-playing component, it would helpful to address the reasoning-behaviour problems referred to
above. Although Thailand was a Buddhist country, Buddhist values were challenged constantly by the materialistic values which accompanied economic development. If the school or system wanted to address this issue, then, this study’s content could be a useful starting point for curriculum reform or development.

The research findings could be seen as the starting point of a research programme. For example, the model; the factors; and the indicators would be beneficial to future researchers who might take into account, in their studies, such factors as age; experience; and gender. The concept of ethical leadership could be clarified further by reference to Buddhist concepts. Some form of participatory action research could be used to investigate how ethical leadership concepts might be introduced into the school administrative system. Specifically, the ethical matters could be resolved when the traditional top-down relationships were supplemented by the relationships of sharing; equality; and empowerment.

References


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