

Leadership Styles of Principals in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This study investigated the leadership styles of school principals in some selected schools in Sri Jayewardenepura Educational Zone (SJEZ) in Sri Lanka. A descriptive survey design was employed. A sample of 12 principals and 225 teachers was randomly selected from 94 schools and data was collected from the sample through a questionnaire and interview. Simple descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyze the data. The findings showed that most principals' practised democratic leadership style in most instances. Principals tend to show autocratic leadership in the process of school administration. However the teachers expect principals to act as democratic leaders with regard to school activities and teacher motivation.

Keywords: Principal, Leadership Style.

1. Introduction

The school principals who are the leaders of schools are responsible for ensuring effective learning in schools. Effective schools require effective school management assisted by the relevant stakeholders. The school head is the key figure in the management and administration of effective school (New Education Act for General Education in Sri Lanka 2009:144). Therefore the importance of the leadership of principals to enhance the effectiveness of school cannot be over looked. Research findings from different countries and different school contexts have show the powerful impact of leadership towards school development. (Hettige, 1996; Nowlan, 2001; Barnett, 2005; Oluremi, 2008; Adeyemi, 2011)

Leadership is a process of influencing followers to achieve the desired expectations. In order to reach the school expectations, principals should be prudent enough to influence and gain support from the stakeholders in the school community. The Hand Book for Principals in Sri Lanka (1986) emphasizes how principal should behave in the school community in order to get the support towards his leadership.

In contemporary school context autocratic leadership has changed as transactional leader. "A democratic, collaborative style of leadership may help the school principal to effectively deal with the growing demands in terms of personal and professional resources." (Nowlan: 2001). Hettige (1996) reveals that positive leadership behaviour of the principal and the decision making process have made an impact in developing teachers' interest on school activities, loyalty and job satisfaction.

All education reforms in Sri Lanka have focused attention on improving the teaching - learning process in the school system through developing leadership of the school principal. In order to achieve the expected goals, teacher support is very important. "Teachers are the most crucial and valuable resource with the system. They must be motivated, dedicated and fully committed to the cause of delivery of quality education. Their capability, availability, effectiveness and attitudes are key factors. Even if the physical infrastructure of the schools is deficient, good leadership by the principal, backed by efficient school management process can fill in the deficiencies" (General Education Reforms 1997:3).

To be successful as a leader, principals should identify the different aspects of his role as a leader. "Their first challenge is to reorient headship from management to leadership. Not only do they have to assume the role of leadership, switching from implementation to initiation, focusing on outcomes and taking risks, but they also need to adopt leadership strategies and styles suitable for hierarchical school organization" (New Education Act for General Education in Sri Lanka, 2009: 144).

Though a principal is expected to perform the role of a "Professional Leader", his/her enacted role is confined to that of an "administrator" (*ibid*; p145). Further it has revealed that many principals have been

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practicing as mere administrators than professional leaders. (Hettige 1992 & 1996; Edirisooriya; 1992, Lekamge *et al*: 2007)

The present study focused to identify the leadership styles practised by the school principals through their perception as well as that of their teachers.

2. Objectives of the study

- This study was carried out to achieve the following objectives:
- Examine the leadership styles practiced by the school principals;
- Identify principals' self perception on their own leadership style;
- Examine how teachers have identified existing leadership style of their principal;
- Identify the appropriate leadership style as proposed by the teachers.

2.1. Methodology

A survey design was executed to carry out this study. Sample was selected by using stratified random sample method. The schools included in the sample represented the four types of schools, namely 1AB, 1C, type 2 & type 3¹. Three schools of each type were included in the sample. In the selected sample 12 principals and 225 teachers were included as shown below.

Table 1: Population and Sample

School Type	Total Number of Schools in the Zone	Number of Schools, Principals & Teachers selected for the sample		
		Number of Schools	Number of Principals	Number of Teachers
1AB	18	3	3	75
1C	22	3	3	60
Type 2	42	3	3	45
Type 3	12	3	3	45
Total	94	12	12	225

Questionnaires and interviews were the main instruments of data collection. Both instruments were executed among principals and teachers. The questionnaire had three main parts. Part A captured general information about the subject. Part B had direct questions with answers to select from and Part C consisted with open ended questions. All questions were in line with the research objectives. The questionnaire executed among Principals focused on achieving first and second objectives. Questionnaire executed among teachers focused on achieving first, third and fourth objectives. The interviews were conducted with all principals and focus group discussion was carried out with twenty-five percent of teacher sample in each school.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to tabulate data and simple descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyze and presented using percentages and graphs. Data obtained through open ended questions and interviews were analysed qualitatively

¹1AB / Schools with Science stream in G.C.E. Advance Level.

1C / Schools without Science stream in G.C.E. Advance Level.

Type 2 / Schools up to Grade 11

Type 3 / Schools up to Grade 5

2.2. Results and findings

The study focused on three leadership styles practised by the school principals. i-e: Democratic, Autocratic and *Laissez-faire* leadership styles.

- Leadership styles practiced by school principals

The study revealed that all principals in the sample generally practised democratic leadership style. In addition they have also practiced autocratic and *laissez-faire* leadership styles in some instances. Further the study brought evidence that principals change their leadership style according to the situation. Even though the study revealed all the principals perceive themselves as democratic leaders, they also believe at times they had to be autocratic particularly in the context of school administration. This finding was supported by a research a conducted by Nosike& Oguzor (2011).

It was also revealed almost all democratic leaders have exhibited totally autocratic behaviour according to the context and situation. Majority of the teachers have agreed that their principals are practicing democratic leadership style in most instances. In addition they also identified that their principals are tend to practise autocratic and *laissez-faire* leadership styles in some instances. It was revealed that principals' in Type2 and Type 3 exhibited democratic leadership style comparing to 1AB and 1Cschools. This is inconsistent with some previous research (Hettige, 1996) that has explained the democratic leadership of principals in Type 2 and Type 3 schools.

- Principals' self-perception on their own leadership style

All principals have identified themselves as most democratic leaders. Further the study brought evidence that principals have changed their leadership style according to the situation. Even though the study revealed all the principals perceive themselves as democratic leaders, they also believe at times they had to be autocratic particularly in the context of school administration. Principals tend behave with the teachers in democratic manner with regard to the important matters in the school such as decision making process, administrative planning etc. In addition, they are aware that they should be democratic leaders to be successful in the school. This finding was supported by a research conducted by Mahce (2003). In addition that they agreed that they too have to practise autocratic leadership style in some instances where discipline is violated. But less number of principal's were aware that they do follow *laissez-faire* leadership style as well, during minor conflict situations among teachers. The study also revealed that variables such as age, gender, and experiences do not have significant impact on leadership style of the principal.

- Existing leadership style of the principal as perceived by teachers.

Teachers have identified their principals as democratic leaders. The study revealed that the teachers were not supportive for autocratic and/or *laissez-faire* leadership styles. Further the focus group discussion revealed that though the principals tend to practise democratic leadership style in most instances, their autocratic leadership have create job dissatisfaction among teachers. The study revealed that a substantial number of teachers (44.7%) were not satisfied with the leadership style of the principal and expressed their desire to get transfer to another school.

- Leadership style as proposed by the teachers.

The teachers identified their principals as democratic leaders; they expect their principals to be democratic continually. They do not want their principals behave differently in different situations. Majority of teachers expect their principals to practise more passive and democratic leadership styles towards their career development in future. Further they expect their principal to be a facilitator and to be supportive in their professional development. The focus group discussion revealed the teachers expect principals to be faire in with regards to work distribution, performance evaluation etc.

2.3. Suggestions:

Based on the study following suggestions are made.

- Leadership training programmes should conduct to enhance the leadership qualities and capacity of leadership among principals.
- Principals should be encouraged to participate in training programmes, to improve their leadership capacity.
- Training programmes should focus on developing relevant characteristic of effective leadership style.

- A self evaluation process should be introduced to the principals to identify strengths and weakness of their own leadership.
- Universities should develop programmes for principals focusing improve of leadership of them. The Open University could develop programmes to be conducted via ODL system.

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