

# PRINCIPALS' TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose**—*This paper aims to contribute experience and ideas of the transformational leadership, not only for the principal want to improve leadership himself (herself), but also for the school at critical period of improvement, through summarizing forming process and the problem during the course and key factors that affect the course.*

**Design/methodology/approach**—*Using case study method, we draw some conclusions of improvement of principal leadership skills, by choosing two typical cases of the transformational leadership of principals in primary schools, rethinking the practice of school improvement profoundly.*

**Findings**—*There has been three periods: embryonic stage, basically forming stage and mature stage. That discovering problems, understanding the relationship between the problems and finding solutions, are the major consideration in the process. The transformational leadership skills of principal can be seen in forming the ideas, building shared vision, power sharing, gaining credence and experiencing success.*

**Practical implications**—*Providing references for the principal to recognize the importance of transformational leadership during the school improvement, in order to force the principal to improve their transformational leadership in practice.*

**Theoretical significance**—*At first, put forward that transformational leadership is the core of leadership; prove that principal's transformational leadership is very important in the school development through the fact that home-school cooperation study; emphasize that principal's transformational leadership should play a key role during the critical period of school improvement. Principal transformational leadership's work should base on different school members' actual situation and different school periods' fact, and then find different solutions.*

## INTRODUCTION

The goal of school development is the school members' direction. If the school wants to develop, it should have different goals during different periods to encourage school member constantly working hard. Because different school members have different expectations about the school development and their own development, they may performance various level of morale when considering the school goals. So the principal need improve his transformational leadership in the process of school improvement. The principals need to create conditions to stimulate the morale of the school members with their higher level of leadership, making different members at different times can be motivated, respected, trusted and improve satisfaction, and gradually reaching a consensus with the overall objectives of the school. Therefore, what the principal should focus on is the school members' need in each stage. Only if the principal can solve the key is-

ues, can the school members' belief be improved, so that the school can transform successfully, and then step to a higher goal. All of these require the principals a lot; he should continue to set new goals and choose different behavior for different people; he plays an important role in those parts for promoting continuous improvement and development of the schools.

## METHOD

### Case study; Action Research

From June 2009 to May 2012, under the supported of Building Excellent School and Foster Prestigious Principal Project designed Tiedong District education bureau, more than 20 team members and I. (including five professional teachers from Northeast Normal University, 10 doctor-postgraduate and postgraduate), had been doing a

research of school improvement in three years, working with the principals and teachers from Lieshishan Primary School and Hunan Primary School (located in Tiedong District, Anshan, Liaoning province, China ). In the past three years, my team and I travelled between Changchun and Anshan per semester, heading for the two schools two or three times to discuss school improvement with the principals and teachers. We did the whole research by multiple ways: researchers giving lectures at the two schools, inviting outstanding teachers in Changchun to talk about their experience, principals attending international conference, establishing hand in hand cooperative with prestigious school, and researchers getting into the classroom and studying teachers' lesson. All these approaches make us come down to the school's philosophy and school regulations and curriculum, teachers' professional development and student assessment. While respecting for independent development of two primary schools, we response to the problems arose in them, and give suggestions as references. What made more sense is the concern about how the transformation leadership of principals develop in a school improvement and how important it is to school development. Hereby some details in the improvement course of the two school will be described to help us rethink problems and achievements they came across and realize the contribution principals made to school development. It's significant for evolution in schools and principal.

### MAIN BODY

Transformational leadership (James Kouzes, 2009, pp.100) refers to leadership skills in those principals who can pioneer the school to a new level at the hinge of school development. A school does not always innovate smooth. Different circumstance and factors make the process appear different---sometimes is advance, sometimes is logjam, much worse is reverse. We all prefer advance to logjam and reverse. Laying emphasis on transformational leadership, we expect principal could create conditions inspire all school members with their higher level of leadership for school improvement at the very time, finally make school get out of mess and realize transition in difficulties. Thus transformational leadership is a crucial quality of principals. However, principals who want to possess transformational leadership can be confronted with challenges from practical problems. Researchers as my colleagues and I are, working with the principals, we experienced and summarized the practice of transformational leadership improvement while watching the school personally and discussing.

### The obstacles in developing transformational leadership

*Have difficulty finding out real problems in the school.* Schools need gradually improving in order to develop, and sometimes it would not achieve the goal. In the process of school improvement-finding problems out, especially issues matters school development progress in the nick of time, challenge the principal seriously. There are three kinds of status principals cannot find out real problems in the school. First, being ignorant of problems--- does the school has any question? It shows that the he principal doesn't possess transformational leadership. Probably he is green hand in principal works, lacking of rational cognition and knowledge of school management. This kind of principals is appointed for their teaching abilities, not for management ability or leadership skills. The two principals cooperated with us are early on their leadership. Though it has history of 50 years, one of them did not have its own specific school idea, which the principal didn't think as a problem. It implies principal was unaware of what school idea mean to a school yet. Without schooling philosophy, principals take stopgap measures and partial methods in school management. Secondly, being puzzled by problems---where is the question. New principals always act like this because of knowing little information about the whole school. Without any doubt discovering problems is hard for them. Thirdly, misunderstanding the problems--- what's the real question, they could make a mistake in settling matters when do not understand what's the true issue (Dunne, 2002, pp.151). On the premise of lacking of understand overall situation, principal is unable to acclimatize oneself to school works. In that way, their partial view of school easily lead to wrongly problem identification, result in taking pseudo-question for real problem. For example, a principal biased him by thinking the fact that the portion of the teacher aged 30 to 40 years old is larger than less than 30 years old indicates an aging teaching body. Actually teacher's professional development is a dynamic developing process. For teachers' development and maturity, 30 to 40 ages is the best of times when teachers are in the prime of one's life, which makes for educational and teaching tasks. The thought that regard these ages as graying ones, not only give positive situation of teacher staff a cold shoulder but also blanket practical matters about teaching team building. In other words, the real issue on teaching fellow is rather the incorrect age structure than aging team.

*Have difficulty analyzing how the relationship between problems.* In school, question arises all at once; some of them are obvious, some are invisible. Some link must be between them. Some problems' existence, development and disappearance are dependent on certain is-

sues. It requires principal being good at telling dominant problems apart, settling them helping subordinate issues be solved. All of those can be seen as a test of whether the principal possess the transformational leadership on finding and resolve key problems. Whereas lacking of transformational leadership principal can't find it in time, in that sense he couldn't take steps to solve it appropriately. Two reasons maybe can be used to explain it. We blame principals knowing scarce school information and being weak in insight into hidden problem firstly, that principal irrespective of priority fails in getting to what's important and attaining the results expected. Secondly that root cause isn't be exactly grasped by principals, is responsible to targeted solution. In new and old teacher pair (Green-blue), for instance, old teachers are keen on to discussing questions with new teachers, and to helping new ones designing and assessing lessons. Enthusiastic assistance and careful design get the new teachers more dependent on old ones. In the situation of independent thinking absent, the classroom will lose initiative and vigour; the new ones will not deal with teaching problems well; certainly it will affect the ability of new teachers' developing. In this case-what the principal wants to solve is the problem of new teachers' development, but he overlook the new problem caused by old guiding new and the relationship between existing problem and new issue. The new issue upon new and old teacher twinning could be corrected timely; the old problem about new teachers' development cannot receive expected effect.

### **The basic process of developing transformational leadership**

Enhancing principals' transformational leadership requires a process; this process can be divided into three stages. The first stage is transformational leadership's embryonic stage. In this stage, the principal have no clear sense, and they can't play the role of transformational leadership consciously and correctly. The principal in this period maybe not the new, but the one works for years in low ability and achievement. That not means they don't have the literacy of transformational leadership, maybe just because this literacy is potential and cannot play its proper role. This potential also prompt the principal think about the school development, proposed the strategy. But these thinking and strategies may not correspond to the actual of school, may not help to promote school development. This situation shows that the principal under the transformational leadership's embryonic stage have the desire to develop the school, but lack of ability to lead the development of the school. Especially during the key point of the school development—when the school face the turning point, principal's leading ability mainly performance in transformational leadership.

The second stage of transformational leadership is the basically formative stage. In this stage, the principal's transformational leadership has undergone considerable development; they can think of the school actual consciously and rationally, and come up with some new strategy, then use these strategies to achieve the purpose of promoting the school development. But during this period, principal's transformational leadership is not yet mature. Although they are actively in thinking and solving problems, their consideration are accidentally or divergent. They still can't put the school development into a dynamic and systematic situation, and their strategies may be less of gradual progress. That means the school have difficult into the sustainable development of the state under the leadership of principal. Hence, principal's thinking often questioned by the teachers and superiors. The principal's good desire may be subject to others' misinterpretation. So during this period, we should understand and help the principal by improving their initiative to prompt the principal's transformational leadership.

The third stage of transformational leadership is the mature stage. In this stage, principals have been able to think freely about the school's development problems; they can continuously put forward effective strategies for solving problems based on the actual situation of the school; they can proposed to further thinking about promoting on the peak of the school development. Their design about school development obviously performance like these: follow the school management rules; look upon the school's current situation in a dynamic and develop vision; design the future of the school purposeful and systematic; strive to make the school into a track of healthy development. The mature of principal's transformational leadership provide an important influence for school development. Under this influence, school members can have positive attitude; school development can performance upward trend. Thus, the school development and the principals' transformational leadership becoming integrated guarantee schools' education quality.

It's worth noting that transformational leadership does not mark with how long being a principal but with putting forward significant options at the very time in school development. A principal, who can always come up with effectual solution or improvement strategy, is equipped with strong transformational leadership.

### **Some important steps of transformational leadership improvement**

Just like the development of the country, school development requires constant transformation. A principal should have strong transformational leadership enhancing and help the school through the hard time to mature

as soon as possible. In the cooperation we realize enhancing principals' transformational leadership progressing step by step, which can be realized by forming the ideas, building shared vision, power sharing, and gaining credence and experiencing success. (YingXiu Yang, 2012, pp.16-18)

***Transformational leadership improvement is based on forming the ideas.*** The school idea determines the development direction of the school, which is the school management's awareness or beliefs after the principal's thinking activity of the objective existence. But school idea's formation based on the reflection of the school management issues. Only if have the solution ideas, can the principal reflect the transformational leadership. The principal can express the school improvement direction and guide the school members from one stage to another by idea. After the discussion, Lieshishan Primary School established the idea of "Respect for Childlike Innocence" and Hunan Primary School determined the idea of "Sunshine Education" which would reflect the students' character. "Respect for Childlike Innocence" cares of Children's rule of development, pays attention to spiritual, give their own life and happiness back to children, and make primary life a beautiful experience worth remembering. "Sunshine Education" cares about creating colorful campus that each child develops harmoniously. Sunshine stands for Life and hope providing living things indispensability energy. The "Sunshine Education" notion require the school to be concerned with each student's growing well; to building school culture and spirit favors full of sunshine, through humanization and individualized emotional care and educational measures; encourage students initiative attitude towards life and learning; ensure their mind and bodies develop healthily. The two ideas differ literally, but share a strong will of solving school problems. It's this will that makes series meaningful moves on school management taken later on.

The school idea does not belong to the principals, but belongs to all the school members. If the school staff and members don't agree with the school idea, it is impossible to convert idea into school action. School members' recognition firstly performance in understanding of the school idea. School members' understanding of the school idea includes literal meaning and extended meaning. Understanding the literal meaning by way of explain the idea and understanding the extended meaning need higher literacy. The school members should profoundly understand the idea of connotation. Secondly it performs by school members reach a consensus with the school idea, and then through the action to show the idea. Caring for school members' recognition of school idea does not mean that the school idea pay no attention to every member's personality. Different members have different background,

therefore the idea have unique effective on their development. For instance, Lieshishan primary school which take "Respect for Childlike Innocence" as their idea, design large-scale opera group calisthenics for their students, and teachers with students participate in the learning of the opera group calisthenics together. They can not only taste Chinese culture in learning, but also understand the spiritual content of different roles in the opera; moreover, they can shape the spiritual of teamwork. By understanding of Peking Opera characters, a student's learning attitude quietly changed: from suffering to enjoying learning; just because he has a judgment of right or wrong to the opera roles. Participating and changes what it leading to prove that the school idea resonates with the school members, and school idea is feeding the school members continuously development, and this development is just the transformational leadership works through ideas.

***Building shared vision is the core of transformational leadership improvement.*** Vision is desired intention or blueprint created and shared school members, also can inspire them to make concerted efforts for certain sake (Peter Senge, 1998, pp.238.). If school members find strength and courage in shared vision, school core capabilities lift and school personality highlight. A school vision is far from principal's vision. It can't be anything but a future and development strategy planning of the school. A principal's transformational leadership lies in leading school members to build shared vision and attempt it. Vision is directional and oriented, making school members strive with clear goals and communication. School members could gain wisdom and grow together, when they try to understand and achieve their vision. Because of this, both Lieshishan Primary School and Hunan Primary School set up the visions of which final goal is students' development, and attempt to make space for students' development by realizing the visions. At that time, students are happy, parents are satisfied, and social is approbatory. When building a vision, principal's transformational leadership would make it has more vitality. A viable vision has the following characteristics.

First it is appealing to school members. The appealing comes from vision making work concrete and caring about their lives. An appealing vision invites them to think school is the best place for their growing and development. With the noting of "Sunshine Education", Hunan Primary School designs three kinds of curriculum to make courses function. National curriculum includes Chinese, math, English, music, sport, art; school-based curriculum includes handwriting, art appreciation, leisure sports, classic reading; student-based curriculum includes art, sport, science, puzzles. National curriculum as staple food provides much needed energy, student-based curriculum as microelement and vitamin C provides

life-sustaining nutrients and school-based curriculum as dessert meets different tastes. This design gives vitality to school vision. The vitality can be seen in the student-based curriculum appealing and in the whole courses caring for physical and mental development, also in the selective student-based curriculum making much of individual difference. Selectivity exactly reflects purposeful and personalized principal leadership style, namely transformational leadership.

Secondly it is germinant itself. School vision is based on comprehensive analysis of school advantages and disadvantages. Growing points appear constantly for the sake of vision. No growing point, no life force in the vision. "Rearing Morality with Aesthetic Education" is a moral education model put forward by Hunan Primary School. Students should listen 100 famous pieces, read 100 famous book and Paintings, called "triple hundred". But the principal didn't satisfied. Based on the several semesters' practice, they came up with 100 games, finally forming "four-hundred" moral education model. new growing points add to the vision, being more in accordance with students' developing physically and mentally, more suit students' desires, and more helpful to reduce stress on learning. The more new growing points appear, more viable the school vision is.

Thirdly it is cohesive to school members. School shared vision can be compared with aids to navigation. Where there is a flag there is a destination school member going to. The vision of school, different team, members' will integrate as one. Every member needs to take spontaneous actions to achieve the school vision. This purpose demand principals of understanding internal demand and making right decision about meeting the demand. Such as teacher' professional development need, principal should create professional opportunities and conditions. In the process of school improvement, teachers benefit a lot from "Shadow Training" between schools established by Hunan Primary School, which also increase teachers' trust in school.

***Gaining credence is the key to enhance principals' transformational leadership.*** Gaining credence means a lot in the school improvement. School improvement is the principal and school members' sincerely cooperate. If it doesn't have enough trust, the cooperation won't be successful. The first reason is that the members of the school personnel are interrelated subsystems, looking at the relationship between the system and system, it needs to be built on the basis of mutual trust, mutual support. The second reason is that mutual trust between the school members reflects the mutual respect between them; respecting others and being respected by others are both the inner need of the members. If the member can be respected in the school environment, he can also

respect others. The third reason is that the mutual trust of the school members is a reflection of the school's healthy interpersonal. It can make the school members feel the relax atmosphere and work unreservedly; enhance the level of goal achievement; improve the effectiveness of school education. Therefore, the principal's taking appropriate leadership style, gaining credence between school members, prompting their win-win cooperation is his essential transformational leadership.

Gaining credence can demonstrate the principal's expedient thinking. Research on leadership style, for example, Fred E.Fiedler proposed expedient thinking about that the effectiveness of leadership behavior depends on situational factors. He thinks situation includes the trust from subordinate to leaders; how clearly the task is; the leader's status and power (Yaojun Sun, 1987, pp.693). The principal's status and power in school is changeless, in that way, school members' trust to the principal and the clear school task are very important. To obtain the trust of the school members, principals should pursue suitable leadership style for school members. Based on Karman's life cycle theory of leadership (Yaojun Sun, 1987, pp.714), if the principal wants to gain the trust, he can use expedient thinking to face the members in different level of mature, he can use command leading, convince leading, participate leading, decentralized leading, and so on. For example, Hunan Primary School based on the characteristic of the students designed the student-based curriculum, in that way, principal and students gain credence from each other. Lieshishan Primary School's "Green-blue" project (the old teachers help the new teachers), which embodied community spirit, also do favors with stimulating different teachers' positive, so that they can achieve the goals of resource sharing and mutual trust (Ferdinand Tnnies, 2010, pp.43).

Gaining credence can enhance principals' transformational leadership. Due to different members have different expectations to school and personal development that they will performance different positive to the school vision. For this, if the leader wants to prompt his transformational leadership during the school improvement, he should create conditions, and use higher-level leadership to stimulate members' enthusiasm and morale, making different members get encouragement, respect and reliance on each stage. Choosing different behaviors based on different people is the key performance in transformational leadership. Take Lieshishan Primary School as an example. It has built up a Comprehensive Quality Evaluation System. The system pays more attention to the ideas and skills' process, diversity and encouragement, which provide superior environment for teachers and students.

***Sharing power is the opportunity to enhance the principal's transformational leadership.*** Principal's power comes from the school members. Although the principal is the administrative leader, if there is no school members' commissioned, he won't have any power (Jacques Rousseau, 1980, pp.73). Under the commissioned by members, the principal centrally exercise the power to serve the members of the school. In this sense, when the principal is using his power, he is fulfilling obligation at the same time. Hence, the core problems of enhancing school improvement's effect are concerned about the proper use of power and efficient allocation of interests. Lieshishan Primary School's and Hunan primary school's principals insist the democratic style of work, try to implement flat management, and actively explore the strategies of power sharing. These not only reduce the burden of the principal, but also mobilize the enthusiasm of the school members.

Sharing power is the opportunity to school improvement. Sharing power means returning the power to the school members, what's more, it means the principal's higher expectation to the members, and he believes everyone is an excellent leader. This indicates that sharing power means trust and respect, and it is the best way to encourage the members. School improvement is a step-by-step process, if we don't have enough accumulation, we won't achieve transcendence success. So, school development is each teacher and student's duty and they should work hard together. When every member participates in school management positively, the school will have foundation of teamwork, and then the higher school efficacy become possible. Therefore, the essence of the power sharing is to stimulate the enthusiasm of the members, to develop their potential and to promote school development.

Sharing power should provide various develop opportunity for school members. If the principal wants his members release their potential, it is necessary to provide them with more opportunities. To the members, an opportunity means power sharing, encouragement, and possibility of getting ahead. Thence, each member expects opportunities. The more opportunities give, the more space of development has. An important performance of transformational leadership is creating more develop opportunities for school members, such as an opportunity to help others, an opportunity to broaden horizons, an opportunity to show themselves, an opportunity to exert creativity and so on. Lieshishan Primary School designs different incentive mechanisms for different levels of teachers, which formed the professional development path of subject rookie, subject backbone, subject elite, subject chief, and subject expert. That makes every teacher can gain develop opportunities during their growing, because they can see the hope for development, adding to the confidence of the development. Hunan primary school let each student take

part in the art activities, admitting different students have different performances, and provide opportunity to each child to show itself. If the principals provide development opportunities for school members, he is providing possibility for the school development at the same time.

***Experiencing success is the lifeblood of transformational leadership improvement.*** School improvement aims at developing the teachers and students. Progress and success should be possible for school gradually improvement. Meanwhile school members can feel the pleasure of success in the process. In return, pleasures gain their trust in themselves and sense of responsibility for school, thus it produce new driving force in school development. This circulation is the source of the viability of school. Principal's transformational leadership should focus on giving members more opportunities for success. Nevertheless, because of member's different understanding of chance and abilities, when taking the opportunity, they may success, also may fail. Giving members more opportunities for success requires principal's to improve transformational leadership in providing suitable opportunities for different members.

The secret of school improvement success is keeping moving. A success ends with a new start. Each improvement needs drawing resources; this must be in the modern school management system. Because the school development is dynamic and school improvement is in the social systems. Without dynamic development idea, school cannot create success. Without resource integrating, school cannot be successful. What we have done for research is beneficial for resource integrating in school improvement. Resources came from education administration and university including manpower, material resources and financial power. That's a lot of resources for schools. Of course, resource integrating benefits researchers' academic development, providing new space for combination of theory and practice. A principal the leader of a school, taking this as an opportunity to improve transformational leadership, will certainly gain a lot in school improvement.

## CONCLUSION

Principal's transformational leadership is the key to prompt school development. It can help the school solve problems pertinently and obtain various degrees of improvement on different stage. The process of forming transformational leadership includes: embryonic stage, basically formative stage and mature stage. The transformational leadership skills of principal can be seen in forming the ideas, building shared vision, power sharing, gaining credence and experiencing success. There are a lot of examples in the practice prove that the principals' lead-

ership plays a key role in the schools development. So enhance transformational leadership is the principal's duty.

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### NOTE

The two principals who worked in Lieshishan Primary School and Hunan primary school was respectively transferred to another two school to be principals by the Education Bureau of Tiedong District when our research was conducted in the third year. And the two schools had new principals then. But this didn't affect our study about transformational leadership. Because from the two new principals, we can still find the quality of transformational leadership that makes our research be able to continue.

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