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Title of Article: Human Resource Management in Hong Kong Preschools:
The Impact of Falling Rolls on Staffing

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact of falling rolls on human resource management in the local preschools. It is argued that the developing role of leadership in creating a culture and procedures for collective participation in staff appraisal is important for human resource management in preschool settings.

Design/methodologies/approach - With the aid of a case study, the paper illustrates and analyzes the policies and practices presently adopted by many preschool heads in the process of personnel management which may potentially affect the quality of education service.

Findings - This paper focuses on discussing the common practices used by many preschool heads in the field to handle staffing reduction. In particular, voluntary redundancy is perceived as an effective strategy to solve the problems of budget deficit. From the quality perspective, the strategy is based on individual decision but not on the teaching performance of staff members. This may have a negative impact on the quality of teaching and service.

Originality/value - Relatively little research on human resource management in

preschools has been conducted in Hong Kong. The illustration of this case study follows other studies in the literature in revealing the important links between human resource management and school development. It is proposed that the management of professional knowledge embedded in teaching practices should be connected to the policy of staff appraisal in order to achieve better quality of service. Thus, the introduction of staff appraisal and collective participation in such processes is, by its nature, a political process. This paradigm shift creates a new agenda for leadership roles and requires a cultural change in preschool settings.

Keywords Human resource management, Leadership, Organizational Learning, Personnel Management, Staff Appraisal, Staff Development

Paper Type Case Study

1. Introduction

In general, human resource management is one of the fundamental strategic areas of an organization. Human resources play an important role in developing the resource capability of an organization in order to meet its objectives and for future development (Armstrong, 2001). In response to the increased competition and lack of stability in the markets, many organizations have initiated new approaches to management, in particular a shift from personnel management (hereafter PM) to human resource management (hereafter HRM) (Storey, 1989, 2001). The main feature of HRM is that it seeks to integrate the management planning of the organization with its personnel management functions. This type of management strategy, linking with the long-range direction and development of an organization, has been widely employed in private business and industry over the past decade. The tenets of this strategy are now appearing in school administration. In Hong Kong, the increased competition and greater turbulence in the field of early childhood education requires the local preschools to achieve both cost efficiency and adaptability. HRM has been seen as a source of competitive advantage for preschools.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact of falling rolls on HRM in local preschools, and to illustrate the discussion with a case study. The second section of this article examines the contextual factors of the local field to provide a backdrop for later discussion. The third section describes the background of the selected case study school and its staffing issues in the process of HRM. The fourth section focuses on reflecting critically on the management approach used by the school principal of the case study school and its potential impact on long-term school development. In conclusion, it is argued that the collective participation of teachers in the development of staff appraisal is central to HRM in preschool settings and has a profound influence on the quality of education in the longer run. Thus, the shift from PM to HRM also requires changes in leadership. That is, the heads of local preschools should be open to appraisal and provide opportunities for their staff and other stakeholders to give feedback on their management and leadership.

2. The Market-driven Preschools

In Hong Kong, all local preschools¹ are private and most rely on fees for their funding. The field of early childhood education is privately run and market-driven.

In the past, the local government only provided small amounts of support to preschools in the form of legislation, finance, inspections, teacher training and curricula. After 1997, the government has taken a more active role in early childhood education. The policy initiatives include upgrading teacher qualifications, implementing a quality assurance framework, harmonising pre-primary education services and introducing a new curriculum guide. Most recently, the government has announced the policy of “subsidizing early childhood education” in the *2006-07 Policy Address*. This will provide fee assistance in the form of “an education voucher” for parents of children aged three to six years old and enrolling in kindergartens starting from the school year 2007-08 (Hong Kong Government, 2006,

¹ The term “preschool” refers to both kindergartens and child care centres, including crèches, residential centers and day nurseries, which cater for various needs. Day nurseries provide day care services for children whose parents are both working. Crèches and residential centers serve children who lack normal family care and provide either permanent family services or residential care. After the harmonisation of pre-primary services in 2006, kindergartens, registered with the Education Bureau, provide services for children from three to six years old. Child care centres are registered with the Social Welfare Department and include nurseries, catering for children aged two to three; and crèches, looking after infants from birth to two.

p. 16). This new policy signifies the formal recognition of the consumer power of parents in the education market (Ho, in press, 2008). The underlying forces shaping the process of HRM at school level in the local marketplace include the impact of demographic changes, school organization and structure, and school leadership. Each of these forces will be discussed below in turn:

2.1 The Impact of Demographic Changes

Due to a rapid decrease in the birthrate after 1997, the demand for preschool education and services has been dropping over the past few years. Recent statistics indicate that the average annual population growth rate of 1.8% in 1996 decreased to 0.4% in 2006 (Census and Statistics Department, 2006). As a result, the number of students enrolling in kindergartens has been decreasing, for example, from 175.1 per thousand in 1998 to 136.1 per thousand in 2003 (Census and Statistics Department, 2004). If we look at education in terms of market theory, the rapid decrease in the birthrate after 1997 has turned the sector into an oversupplied market. The downward trend in the birthrate has led to a keen competition among preschools in Hong Kong.

Historically, the public perceived the preschool service as a preparation for primary school and custodial service (Oppen, 1992). Having a caregiver with specialized professional training did not seem to be important for parents. This reflected the idea that preschool teaching was simply a child-rearing practice. However, the situation has changing in recent years. In 2000, the Education Bureau (formerly the Education and Manpower Bureau) published *Performance Indicators* as a quality assurance mechanism for kindergartens. The document injects a new framework into the service and functions of preschools in terms of quality and accountability. Indeed, the *Key Statistics of the 2006 Population Census* indicated that the average domestic household size is getting smaller, from 4.2 in 1976 to 3.0 in 2006 (Census and Statistics Department, 2006). This demographic change probably also leads to a new view of early experience emerging in the public debate. Nowadays, parents pay more attention to the importance of preschool education and its quality. They have become convinced of the correlation between early and later development periods and children as potential resources to be nurtured. The function of preschools has begun to shift from child-rearing to developmental nurturing. As such, the quality of education service becomes the competitive edge of a preschool.

2.2 School Organization and Structure

According to the study conducted by Oppen in 1992, preschools have a variety of sponsors including religious organizations, voluntary agencies and profit-making organizations. Although the data was collected more than a decade ago, it can still be regarded as an important knowledge-base for reference as no up-to-date large-scale survey has been conducted since. A large number of kindergartens are operated by non-profit, voluntary agencies and religious organizations; and most of the child care centers belong to non-profit voluntary agencies to provide services for the children of working parents. That is to say, some preschools are run independently and many others are operated together with a number of sibling schools by their parent organizations. For those kindergartens or child care centres that are operated by a parent organization, they are coordinated by their head office and follow the same management policies.

As indicated in the same study, the average size of school was 370 children and 15 teachers. Since the numbers of preschools, enrollments and teachers are decreasing due to the drop in the birthrate, the average size of school and number of teachers per school is presumably now smaller than it was ten years ago. For example, the

average number of classes was around 10 in the sample of 30 kindergartens inspected in 2002-03 (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2003). Usually, the staff of a kindergarten consists of a principal, a head teacher and a number of teachers while nursery staff includes generally a supervisor, an assistant supervisor and registered child care workers. The school structure is relatively simple. A simple organization has the strategic advantage of direct supervision and co-ordination. However, the flexibility in HRM would vary in the different organizational settings of the local preschools. Generally speaking, there would be quite limited flexibility in those schools running independently. On the other hand, more flexibility is possible in those being operated together with a number of sibling schools by their parent organization.

2.3 School Leadership

The School Management Initiatives in 1991 described the management and leadership style of school principals in primary and secondary schools as centralized, hierarchical, and authoritative (Education Manpower Branch and Education Department, 1991). The document strongly urged a change in principals' leadership from an authoritarian style to a more participative and collegial style. Compared

with primary and secondary schools, preschools have relatively simple organizational structure as described in Section 2.2. However, because of the general culture of education in Hong Kong, the situation in the preschool system in the past decade might be quite similar. The preschool heads are on the top of this structure and tend to construct the centre of power and the centre of decision-making.

Starting in 1997, the education reform has initiated fundamental changes in all aspects of education in Hong Kong. As indicated in the *Education Commission Report No. 7* (1997), there is a need to develop a quality culture in the school system with the initiation and participation of effective school leaders. As mentioned in section 2.1, in response to the Education Commission's call for quality education, the Education Bureau published *Performance Indicators* as a quality assurance mechanism for kindergartens in 2000. The set of indicators comprises four domains: management and organization, learning and teaching, support for children and school ethos, and child development. In the domain on management and organization, working relationships with staff is one of the key items to assess the leadership performance. School management is required to "provides opportunities and sets up mechanism to promote discussions. The staff are encouraged to openly express their ideas and give feedback in response to the proposals put forth"

(Education and Manpower Bureau, 2000, p.17). Such a goal requires a paradigm shift in preschool principalship, moving from the traditional concentration on maintenance and hierarchy to openness, collective participation and collegiality.

3. The Preschool Case

This section describes the background of a local preschool case. To a certain extent, it reflects common phenomena in the field. The preschool had over 10 years of history and had a good reputation in the neighborhood. It offered full day and half day programmes. The teacher-student ratio was 1:15. The teaching team consisted of 12 teachers. Most of them had been working in the school for more than eight years. The staff turnover rate was low.

The preschool was a non-profit-making kindergarten located in a public housing estate. Most funding of the school came from fees and the school could apply for government assistance. The assistance comes in two forms: direct assistance and fee assistance. The former is provided through the Rates and Rent Reimbursement Scheme. The school can apply for reimbursement only if the enrollment has reached the minimum viable student number. If the enrollment is below the minimum, the school will not be eligible for the scheme. The latter is the fee assistance to needy parents which is scaled according to the family's ability to pay at or below a pre-set income baseline.

Due to the decrease in the birthrate, the figures of student enrollment in 2005 dropped slightly. At that time, the school used its reserved funds to resolve the problem of a budget deficit. However, the number of students enrolled dropped significantly again in 2006 and the school budget could not cover the deficit. In other words, the staffing establishment could no longer be maintained as it was. The principal had to face the problem of staff reduction. The principal proposed two possible solutions: one was that two teaching posts should be reduced in order to make ends meet, and the other some full-time teachers should switch to half-day posts. Finally, one teacher decided to resign and two teachers were willing to work part-time. The immediate financial problem was resolved.

4. A Reflection on the Human Resource Management

Legge (2005) defines PM as the practices related to selecting, developing, rewarding and directing employees in such a way that the employing organization can achieve its goals. In contrast, HRM is directed mainly at management needs for human resources. It is identified with management interests and is relatively distant from the employees. Torrington (1989, p. 60) also argues that PM is supply-driven, focusing on problem-solving and mediation, while HRM is demand-driven, focusing on planning, monitoring and control and on the integration of organizational strategies. Furthermore, as pinpointed in the introduction of this paper, HRM links with the long-term direction and development of an organization (Storey, 1989, 2001). In the following, the concepts of PM and HRM are used to reflect critically on the selected case.

4.1 The Problem Solving Practice

It appears that the selected case illustrates the common practices used by many preschool heads in the field to handle staffing reduction. In particular, voluntary redundancy is perceived as an effective strategy to solve the problems of budget deficit. This strategy merely focuses on the reduction in the number of employees,

and follows the traditional PM approach outlined above. The positive side of this method is that it can lead to less painful decisions and produce a compromise through negotiation which is recognized and endorsed by all staff members. However, at the same time this strategy produces more problems for the management. Obviously, it is a short-term solution. The pressure of falling rolls on school income is likely to reoccur in the coming years. More importantly, there are no formal procedures for handling personnel matters. The staffing issues remain unresolved. The principal of the case study school will have much greater difficulty in handling the problem of staff reduction in the subsequent years if the number of students enrolling keeps decreasing. This is because the remaining staff are probably not willing to opt for the part-time post or for resignation. From the quality perspective, the method is based on individual decision but not on the teaching performance of staff members. This may have a negative impact on the quality of teaching and service. The short-term stability reflects the limited vision of the leadership and leads to more fundamental management problems and quality issues in the long run.

4.2 Building Capacity from Within

The discussion above focuses on the issues and difficulties in the management of the selected case, which involves traditional practices of PM. The strategy of voluntary redundancy itself is a problem-solving approach which reflects a minimum of adaptation and is an instance of what Tyson (1985, p. 6) called the “systems reactive model” of PM. In my view, a more proactive approach in the process of HRM should be adopted in the local preschools to meet the new challenges of falling rolls and keen competition in the field. As mentioned in Section 2.1, the public perception of the role of preschools has shifted from child-rearing to developmental nurturing. That is to say, improving the quality of teaching may give the competitive edge to a school in the changing educational marketplace. If this is the case, heads of local preschools need to change their practices from those of PM to HRM, and that move involves connecting staffing policies with staff development and organizational learning for long-term school development.

As discussed in Section 2.2, some preschools are run independently and many others are operated together with a number of sibling schools by their parent organizations. For those preschools that are operated independently, they have to consider how they can improve the quality of teaching as a value-added strategy to attract parents. In the worst case scenario, if the number of students decreases sharply, school heads

have to develop criteria for staff appraisal related to teaching quality and link this to redundancy. This can be used to minimize the negative effects of changes on staffing and on the quality of service. Those preschools operated with a number of sibling schools by their parent organizations have more flexibility in human resources. The staffing issues can be reconsidered and reconceptualized from a wider and more dynamic perspective of HRM. Guest (1997) argues that HRM posits a closer connection between long-range direction and personnel policies and practices. He identifies it as the goal of integrating the external and internal environments. External integration refers to the relationship between HRM and the organizational environment. Internal integration covers the need for HRM policies to be consistent with the strategic plan, and to include the employees as the integral part of the organization. In this sense, teaching staff in schools should be treated as an asset to be upgraded rather than merely a variable cost to be minimized. That is to say, the way in which people are managed and appraised is a matter of crucial strategic concern.

What constitutes the competitive advantage of an educational organization and how can it be achieved? This question is fundamental to the human resource management of local preschools. In my view, the quality of service stemming from research-based practice is probably the answer, as the function of preschools has

begun to shift from child-rearing to developmental nurturing. Quality of practice is now being seen as the competitive advantage that local preschools need in the highly competitive environment, and the management of the knowledge embedded in the professional practices is considered critical to organizational performance. Ipe (2003, p. 338) proposes that if organizations have to capitalize on the knowledge they possess, they have to understand how knowledge is created, shared, and used within the organization. To further his proposition, I argue that the management of professional knowledge embedded in teaching practices should be connected to the policy of staff appraisal in order to achieve better quality of service. The new form of staff appraisal will be thoroughly discussed in the next section.

4.3 The New Form of Staff Appraisal

Staff appraisal itself is a contested terrain. Appraisal by objectives became the touchstone phrase for the 1990s. This implies that an employee can be effectively evaluated within the pre-established objectives. This kind of appraisal has a shortcoming that it emphasizes assessment of current performance rather than future development. This raises the question of competence and competency specification in education. “Competence can be regarded as the demonstrated capacity to perform

at the satisfactory level, and competencies on the other hand can be thought of as description of a performance anticipated.” (Harris and Monk, 1992, p. 63) If put into the framework developed by Sisson and Storey (2000), the two concepts can be described as performance review and potential review respectively. Although there may be a conflict between the accountability and the development purpose of appraisal, it is worth trying to reconceptualise the nature of staff appraisal in such a way if school improvement is a top priority. The conception involves not only the employment of individual staff members, but also strategically links to the quality of service and school development. How could the policies and practices of HRM be formulated to capitalize on the knowledge that the schools possess in order to achieve better quality of service? The major implication is that teachers need to learn about learning. Cheng et al. (2003, p. 920) state that teaching nowadays is becoming research-based, outcomes-oriented, service-driven and team-focused. Along with this paradigm shift, I propose a new form of staff appraisal which is integrated with the process of collective action research as a means to achieve better quality of service.

Action research involves initiating some actions in one’s teaching and then systematically analyzing the teaching processes and outcomes (Carr, 1995). It makes

it possible to revitalize the knowledge base through the exploration of the practical context (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Ho (2006, p. 312) argues that engaging in action research serves a larger vision by providing a better grounding to tie preschool knowledge and practice to professionalism and to demonstrate the quality of practice to the parents and to the general public. In addition, Prahalad and Hamel (1990, p.85) suggest that it is critical for an organization to develop its “core competencies” which are collective learning in the organization. Core competencies refers to how the organization as a whole works. It involves the ways in which people work together, communicate, and co-operate together. Hayton (2003, p.380) recognizes the importance of collective learning in the process of HRM that promotes knowledge sharing, and organizational learning found to be positively associated with organizational performance.

In line with the two arguments above, the new form of staff appraisal should be integrated with the process of collective action research and should contain two important elements: the core competencies of a learning organization, and self-reflective evaluation. In this notion, the action research should be carried out by the whole team of teaching staff rather than by individuals. As a matter of fact, it is almost impossible to introduce new forms of pedagogical action through individual

effort and without collaboration between teachers and the support of leadership.

Therefore, action research on teaching should become a shared collegial goal of the school (Sockett, 1993). Teachers have to work in groups and need to learn from one another's wisdom and insights as they develop the capacity to reflect and research.

Despite a push for external accountability and monitoring of teaching performance, appraisals are not well liked by teachers. Lee and his colleagues (2001) found that secondary teachers in Hong Kong were wary of appraisal which failed to contextualize their work. Staff appraisal focused on teaching behavior rather than integrating with the contextual factors at classroom level. Situations in the preschools may be quite similar. Appraisals arouse anxiety and hostility when such judgments are closely tied to employment status in the current situation. Lee's study also indicated that teachers were, however, willing to accept strategies designed to make them more self-reflective. When teachers are equipped and confident in the use of self-evaluation tools, they are more willing to accept external evaluation. Therefore, if staff appraisal could integrate with the self-reflection of collective action research, it would be more positive and conducive to teaching performance and school improvement.

5. Concluding Remarks

The construction of a form of appraisal is not a difficult task, particularly with many prototypes available in the field. Staff appraisal in school settings, however, is an enormously complex process. It includes not only the difficulty of measuring human behaviors but also the difficulty of verifying the relationship between those behaviors and the learning process (Harris and Monk, 1992). From both judgmental and developmental perspectives, assistance should be provided in areas considered to be ineffective to allow the teacher to improve before any final decision on performance capability is made (Castetter, 1996). Moreover, teachers should be involved in the process of the development of appraisal instruments. Collective participation creates a sense of ownership. In addition, training and preparation should be provided as they are critical factors determining the successful implementation of an appraisal system that creates sustainable, focused behavioral change (Bracken et al, 2001).

The introduction of staff appraisal and collective participation in such processes is, by its nature, a political process. According to Cheng (2000, p. 82), principals in Hong Kong are relatively weak in the political and cultural dimensions and most of

them tend to be “manager” types. As mentioned in Section 2.3, preschool heads tend to construct the centre of power and the centre of decision-making. They need to be more sensitive to the political and social constraints within which they are working. Vision building, collaborative relationships, and the quality of communication and participation are the critical factors in the introduction of a new form of staff appraisal. This paradigm shift creates a new agenda for leadership roles and requires a cultural change in preschool settings.

Ogbonna (1992, p. 91) suggests that organizational culture is an important condition for HRM in practice. Changing culture probably requires changes in leadership at the top. Heads of the local preschools need to be more open to appraisal and allow opportunities for their staff and other stakeholders to give feedback on their management and leadership. There is a trend that 360-degree feedback becomes a powerful organizational intervention to increase awareness of leadership development (Armstrong, 2001). Such initiatives will give an impetus to the successful introduction of staff appraisal as part of the policy and practice of HRM in schools.

Limits and possibilities can be identified in the selected case. The potentialities lie in

preschool head's awareness and expertise to be able to understand the shortcomings of the traditional practices of PM. From a wider perspective, it reveals many deep-seated barriers to change and the potential and opportunity for HRM in the future development of schools, particularly for those running in a quasi-market environment.

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