

## **Recruitment of School Principals in Vietnam: Using Evidences for Changing Appointment Policies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The recruitment, retention, and development of school principals should be considered as a great importance for all school systems because cadres of qualified and experienced principals are the core factor for school development. But how to recruit qualified school leaders is still ignored in Vietnamese school system. In this paper, the researcher used qualitative design to figure out the status quo of elementary school principals in Vietnam on aspects knowledge and skills in school leadership and their causes; and feedback on the reasonableness of the principal recruitment process put in the context of the actual work. The study employed ten participants for interviewing with semi-structured interview protocol. The finding showed the evidences on ill-suitable recruitment process of elementary school principal in Vietnam and also suggested for a reasonable recruitment process so that schools can select qualified principals. It is assumed that this preliminary research will provide useful findings for educational policy makers in Vietnam think about revising principal recruitment process at primary education level.*

**Keywords:** recruitment; school principal; in-service training programs

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

National socio-economic development strategy has decided that education should be a national policy priority, is the future of the nation. This policy is reflected by increasing national concern about education and the increasing percentage of the national budget (devoted to education increasing from 13% in 1998 to 20% in 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Despite these changes and achievements in education, it has not fulfilled society's expectations and progress is not consistent with the investment made so far.

Vietnamese educational system now faces difficult choices in planning for the future, it must find more effective methods of operation to make these choices. Recent Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)'s reports have shown the real weaknesses in educational management in both local and central governments. Educational authorities are attempting to seek solutions for improvement of national education quality through general education to higher education. However, it is still a dilemma since they do not know where to begin. Moreover, it is difficult to determine which component of the education system need to be reformed in the context of society putting heavily pressure on educators and educational authorities.

“Education management is a key factor for enhancing quality of national education” (National Assembly, 1992), however, the national education system employs 90,000 school administrators; of these, 40% received their training in short-term courses on educational

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<sup>1</sup>Source: Department of Finance and Planning, MOET, 2008

administration, and only 0.02% has earned bachelor and master's degree in educational administration. This is a consequence of the recruitment process and informal professional training school administrators of Vietnam's educational system (Institute of Educational Managers Ho Chi Minh City, 2005). In this study scope, the researcher is interested on examination recruitment process of principals at elementary education level.

This study is aimed at analyzing the status quo of elementary school principal recruitment process in Vietnam and suggesting solutions for changing this process to better suit educational and social development in an era of international integration and national development.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Doing research on training, recruitment and appointment elementary school principals have not been concerned by scholars and educational authorities in Vietnam. Literature related to educational leadership, principalship, and even principal training, recruitment, appointment in Vietnam is limited in scope and depth. By using different search strategy with variety of keywords regarding educational administration, educational leadership, and school principals both in Vietnamese and English, it is unable to identify a single research paper. It just has some reports from online newspapers that reflected practical issues around the school building.

Based on the requirement of public demands for a better general education quality, selecting qualified school leaders becomes an imperative need. This topic has been studied in developed countries in the world for years. That shows the important role of school principals in school improvement and educational system. As Mark A. Baron (1990) suggested that "...the principal's leadership is one of the key determinants in the success of any school" (p.3). Thus, principal recruitment process and selection criteria need to be examined with caution in each country, including Vietnam. As mentioned above about the scope of the paper, following will review literature related to elementary school principal recruitment and appointment.

Recruitment of effective elementary school principal has become an increasingly concerning matter in educational systems around the world. In America, the school sector has tended to have a poor history of professional recruitment and retention of staff. These problems are especially severe for the recruitment of head (Mark, Rhodes and Gkolia, 2006). There is ample evidence that many school districts lack established policies and procedures for systematic recruitment and selection of principals. Goodlad (1984) summarized the situation that in many districts the selection and preparation of school leaders is casual. Robert (as cited in Klauke, 1988) likewise believes the principal recruitment and selection process is "ridden with chance" and often does not conform to sound policy. It is also common in most of principal recruitment case in America that principal recruitment and selection still operates on the buddy system. It leads to the ablest educational leaders may never want to become school principals (Klauke, 1988).

Another problem regarding school leaders is quality of candidates. For the past several years, researchers in the field of educational administration have pointed to trends indicating a future crisis resulting from a shortage of qualified, licensed school administrators (Bowles, 1990). With regard to the issue of qualified administrators, Bowles (1990) stated that too many unqualified candidates are licensed. A report's finding of Browne-Ferrigno and Alan (2002) demonstrated that many entrants into educational leadership positions do not feel

fully prepared for the reality of the tasks required of them. Worrying about low principal quality, Anderson, Mark E. (1991) emphasized that the selection is central in hiring the most capable principals and he stated that there are two possible explanation for not select the best candidates: (1) districts' vacancy announcements and selection criteria are nonspecific, and (2) district use inadequate screening and selection technique.

Based on the state quo of lacking quality candidates, Bowles (1990) offers suggestions for high quality university programs and the recruitment of qualified candidates. In reality, however, Anderson (1991) asserted that most university programs present knowledge about school administration, but do not help students develop skills to translate that knowledge into practice. In addition, summarizing the state of affairs in a 1983 policy report, the Southern regional education board stated that principals' overriding complaint about university training programs is that they are too theoretical, and do not provide the necessary training to deal with the job (Chapman, 2005). A recently reported study undertaken in the USA (Quinn et al., 2006) has also posed questions concerning the nature of knowledge, skills and experiences required to support leadership potential and desire.

Searching and deploying real work fitted principal recruitment process is always a concern of scholars and educational researchers in order to select qualified candidates to manage schools in an environment with many changes and high demand. This is an initial study on this topic in the case of Vietnam. For the purpose of understanding Vietnam's education overview, following provides concrete point of the national education system.

Due to the *Đổi Mới* (renovation) reform policy program in 1986, a more comprehensive and flexible structure for the education system was created in 1993 by the Government (Resolution 04-NQ/HNTW, dated 14<sup>th</sup> January 1993, on Education Renovation Continuation). The new organization of the education system consists of formal education and non-formal education and is divided into: pre and kindergarten education, 12 years of general education, 2 years of vocational, and 4 years of college, follow by 2 or 5 years of graduate study. For example, there is a 5-4-3 national model for general education: 5 years of primary education, 4 years of lower secondary and 3 years of upper secondary education; other short courses in professional education, and from 5 to 6 or 7 years, with undergraduate, master and doctoral degrees.

In each annual and five-year plan, MOET always determines the important role of administrators and school leaders in completing missions of organizations. For the purpose of improving educational administration, MOET proposes strong decentralization to increase the autonomy and responsibility of local administration in order to help them to solve and prevent problem effectively. This leads to the current needs of training for educational administrators at the executive levels from the national and local department of education. Thus, in the last few years, the MOET and the government emphasize on the issues of educational administrator training, especially the principal training for general education level.

Currently, MOET has assigned two main agencies that are responsible for the training of educational managers and administrators in Vietnam and some local universities. These are the National Institute for Educational Management (NIEM) in Hanoi, the capital city, Northern Vietnam and Institute of Educational Managers in Ho Chi Minh City, Southern Vietnam which provide formal and in-service trainings for educational administrators. These

institutions offer training courses to enhance knowledge and skills which could be useful for school leadership practice, such as planning, understanding organization, managing human resource, managing infrastructure and finance, managing teaching and learning, etc.

In general, not like other countries and the area in the region such as Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, the human resource development infrastructure of the educational systems is well developed (Gian et al., 2012), Vietnam aspirations for school principals at basic education level to lead schooling reform may find a less stable and systematic approach to training and development.

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study of elementary school principal recruitment in the context of Vietnam employed the qualitative research design. It allows exploring rather than explaining the status quo of principal recruitment.

Firstly, the researcher used document analysis that includes reviewing relevant literature dealing with both theory and evidence and locating existing sources of raw data. Synthesis and analysis of domestic and international documents which involve in selection, training, appointment and maintained elementary school principal as well as the relationship between recruitment process, training, maintenance principal and principal performance. Relevant documents are clarified to outline the main meaning of the issues. Related issues are presented and analyzed for emerging school principal recruitment irrationalities in Vietnam. Documents are searched from vary relevant information sources: journal articles, books, and dissertations; publications and reports of interest groups; government publications and research documents; and the popular press.

Second, the researcher selected ten participants from Ho Chi Minh City in South Vietnam who are serving at elementary education level. Ten interviewees are the representative sample of current staff in elementary school system, including supervisors, elementary school principals, and elementary school teachers. Participant selection is based on their willingness to cooperate with the study. All of participants have more than 5 years of working experience in their current positions. Interviews averaged about one hour in length and were conducted between May 25 and June 25, 2013. Interviewees will be questioned on the following issues: Assessment of the status quo of elementary school principals in Vietnam on aspects knowledge and skills in school leadership and their causes; and feedback on the reasonableness of the principal recruitment process put in the context of the actual work.

Based on the research purpose, a semi-structured interview protocol was designed to use for the study. Then, the researcher used the Transana program to transcribe all audio data of the interview transcripts (Transana, 2005). Next step, the researcher used the qualitative data analysis program Atlas.ti for importing and analyzing transcripts.

### **4. FINDING**

The presentation of results is organized based on core points of the study. These are: Assessment of the status quo of elementary school principals in Vietnam on aspects knowledge and skills in school leadership and their causes; and feedback on the reasonableness of the principal recruitment process put in the context of the actual work.

**Assessment of the status quo of elementary school principals in Vietnam on aspects knowledge and skills in school leadership and their causes**

The ten participants in this study included two supervisors, five elementary school principals and three elementary teachers. They all graduated with bachelor degrees with their major in pedagogy, except one principal is in his master program. They were born before 1970s and had more than five years at current positions. Principals and teachers were serving in public schools.

The interview results identify two main weaknesses that principals were facing: insufficiency of knowledge and skill in school management and school leadership. Most of them confronted with planning school development as starting of a school year. For example, one of the supervisors stated:

Beginning of every school year is the hard time for every principal, especially newly appointed principal. They have many duties to complete before the new school year ceremony, usually on September 5 each year. The most difficult task is often planning school development. Our roles as district supervisors are to set directions, support, and monitor school development plans. School principals are responsible for planning their school developments and for coordinating school community to implement these plans to achieve stated goals of their schools. However, newly appointed principals are confused and they usually consult me for planning the school development (Interview transcripts, PR01).

Principals did not only face obstacle on planning school development but also on other managerial activities, such as financial management, human resource management. One principal shared his worry:

We are aware of our roles as the key players in the school improvement process. But we are not attended such a kind of training program for principal before being appointed for this position. Therefore, we are nervous for all tasks not related to teaching and learning such as financial management and human resource management task. We must ask the consultancy from experienced principals or district supervisors. Thanks for the understanding and valuable supports of experienced principals, we finally resolved the big obstacles (Interview transcripts, PR08).

In comparing with other tasks of school principals, the task of instructional leadership was easier in terms of knowledge and skills. Explanation for this reason, one principal stated:

We have advantages of gaining a range of prior teaching experience. In addition, we have assistant from the vice principal who is delegated instructional leadership role. She (vice principal) supports me in term of teachers' professional training and students' learning. However, I still have to observe the classroom activities and discuss with teachers about teaching and learning. Through the classroom observation, I can see how teachers implement the lesson plan and how they deliver the lesson to their students. After each observation, I will debrief with the teachers directly in order to show their mistakes and help them follow the right track as defined by the school's plan (Interview transcripts, PR04).

With the wide range of teaching experience before become the principals, they are excellent in teacher professional development. One teacher with six years of teaching experience shared her opinion:

Our principal is very good at teacher professional development. I can recall the first days of my job as a classroom teacher. I could not effectively manage the classroom, it was really messy and chaotic. He (the principal) taught me how to manage the classroom and how to seek the support from school community for my work. He also shared with me how to improve teaching and learning quality, and he asked me closely follow the curriculum issued by MOET, too (Interview transcripts, PR05).

In addition, all five principal participants in this study dedicated their daily work for teacher professional development. They offered many opportunities for teachers to attend training courses in the school site or in other teacher training institutes. Throughout these programs, their teaching staff learnt new skills in their pedagogy or subject knowledge. They also asked teachers who participated training programs shared experiences and reflections with other teachers.

Based on information that participants revealed, the conclusion of reasons caused status quo of qualification of school principals in Vietnam was as follows: They did not have enough preparation for the principal position. Most of the newly appointed principals had just taken in-services training courses after appointment while their backgrounds were typically former teachers with a range of experience in teaching within the elementary school system.

Newly principals face many difficulties in their principal works in the first year of the term. The main reason leading to these problems is that they are not an educational management expertise. In recent years, 40% of newly principals have been trained through the educational management courses, or joined seminars on management, principals who have master or doctorate degrees accounting for only 0.02% (Interview transcripts, PR03).

Our current primary school principals are recruited, trained throughout their practical activities with monitoring and evaluation of their organizations and educational short training courses. The elementary school principal training and retraining are not planned in updated formal curriculum. We don't have a mechanism to coordinate and assign responsibility for principal preparation training (Interview transcripts, PR01).

#### **Feedback on the reasonableness of the principal recruitment process put in the context of the actual work**

According to synthesis of data, the process of elementary school principal recruitment in Vietnam could be presented as follows:

Elementary school principal recruitment in Vietnam begins after ending a five-year principal tenure, the District Bureau of Education and Training will announce the new appointment of a principal for the next period. Head of Bureau of Education and Training appoints public elementary school principals and approves private school principals based on principal appointment and approval process.

The elementary school principal appointment is based on the outcome of a candidate's application. Criteria are specified as follows: (1) teachers who reach professional standard (intermediate pedagogy diploma) or vice principals or former principals who have just ended a five-year tenure, (2) at least three years of teaching experience in elementary schools or at least one year of experience as a elementary school vice principal, (3) completing a training

program for administration cadres (short-course training), (4) positive outlook in political views, ethics, lifestyle, (5) qualified managerial competency, and (6) being in good health.

In the public sector, a principal is not permitted to hold more than two uninterrupted tenures at the same school. An elementary school principal tenure is five years. Often time, each principal is assigned only one school per tenure. In the cases that principals demonstrated exceptional leadership, then he or she will be allowed to continue the tenure, sometimes, it could be two or three appointments of tenure at the same school. Candidates for school leadership may be self-nominated, selected, nominated, or recommended by e senior officials in the District Bureau of Education and Training.

Giving opinion on the reasonable process of principal recruitment, one principal stated:

It is usually that new appointed principals will start principal work immediately. After that, they are required to attend in-service training courses that were designed in 1990s for new principals in summer months according to the requirements of MOET. These training courses do not provide sufficient knowledge and skills for school leadership because most of new principals' background is typically former teachers without being trained in educational management (Interview transcripts, PR02).

Insufficient knowledge and skills in school management, the principal manages schools based on his experience accumulated through practice but he lacks of professionalism, confidence, flexibility and creativity. Therefore, it is not effective in educational management. They also make errors in the management process. Principal training courses is not fulfill work requirements. And school districts may not invest sufficient time, energy, and money to identify, train, and induct new principals (Interview transcripts, PR01).

It could be noted that principals' background were teachers, lead teachers or vice principals and they did not spend time on any formal educational management program as preparation for principals. They were not trained on legislation, organizational operation, human resource management, and especially in financial management. Thus, they were good in teaching professional but lacked of knowledge and skills of educational administration.

One of the participants in this study presented her desire:

I think Vietnamese elementary school principals need to be trained in a formal principal preparation program for their professional development. The current principal recruitment process is ill-suited to the development and employment of qualified leaders. In-service training programs in universities do not adequately prepare aspiring administrators for the complexity of the principalship (Interview transcripts, PR06).

When considering principal recruitment process, it was easy to recognize that newly appointed principals received little induction or in-service training. They just took part in a one or two-day induction program at the beginning of the school year, with some in-servicing regarding the employing authorities' agenda for the year. There was not a systematic program of learning, and induction based on an analysis of a newly appointed leader's previous experiences and capabilities integrated with the needs of the particular school, system, and context in which he/she served.

For many years, principals had voiced dissatisfaction with the utility of in-service training programs to help them adapt to the realities of principal life. A principal argued:

In-service training programs have not changed significantly. The training programs is too theoretical, and do not provide the necessary training to deal with the job. It (the training course) presents knowledge about the school administration, but does not help learners develop skills to put that knowledge into practice. We should have a need for a fundamental rethinking of the content, structure, delivery, and assessment of leadership learning. Therefore, it is difficult to expect a qualified principal in an elementary school under such a recruitment process (Interview transcripts, PR06).

## 5. Conclusion and recommendation

Relying on analysis of the real situation in this preliminary study, we can determine the weakness of the elementary school principal. These weaknesses derived from the recruitment process, training, retaining are not reasonable. Therefore, we propose a solution to improve the quality and qualification of Vietnamese elementary school principals. What is needed is to change the elementary school principal recruitment process to match actual requirements. These candidates who are selected through principal selection must participate in one year formal principal preparation programs. The program is designed to equip pre-principals with comprehensive educational management knowledge and skills. After completing the program, they need to be appointed as vice principals several years in order to help them translate the theoretical to the real environment.

Quality schools require quality leadership. Quality leadership cannot be assumed or acquired without a coherent, integrated, consequential, and systematic approach to leadership recruitment, retention, and development (Judith, 2005). Principal can be made on the job, after appointment, apparently. But effective administration by new principals could be achieved much sooner with sufficient and proper recruitment, selection, and pre-principalship training. One selected, new principals should not be left to grope for their own administrative style.

Vietnamese educational policy makers should pay more attention to making policy for elementary school principal recruitment process in order to select qualified candidates. It is assumed this study supplies evidence for changing the principal recruitment process and policy in Vietnam.

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