

MBA Dissertation Proposal – Simon Greenhalgh, 1602760.

Background

As the world becomes increasingly globalized, there are more cross-cultural interactions taking place (Wheelen et al., 2018) Schools, universities and similar educational organizations operate across various countries, in numerous languages and are open to people from a wide-range of backgrounds, nationalities, languages, beliefs and customs (Hayden, 2006). The growth of this sector has led to research and questions around the intersection of business, education and culture. International schools are one of these organizations which bring together a large number of people from different backgrounds. Students and staff may be drawn from all over the world. This study is going to be focusing on staff in particular, where we are able to distinguish between local employees and expatriate staff. As the study is limited in scope, it was decided to keep the study to within the boundaries of South Korea. The study hopes to contribute to the knowledge that connects research into organizations and the field of education and to bridge some of the gaps that may exist in the cultural understanding between South Korea and other nations.

Research question

To what extent does cultural knowledge and understanding predict power and influence in international educational organizations in South Korea?

Objectives

- To synthesize and add to the research on both power and cross-cultural organizations in South Korea
- To find similarities and differences in the manifestations of power in cross-cultural educational organizations in South Korea
- To analyse and make recommendations on power within the cross-cultural interactions taking place in educational institutions in South Korea

Literature review

Theoretical perspectives of organizations and their leadership traditionally placed emphasis on both structure and strategy in guiding successful business operations. In studying dysfunction within international organizations, Barnett and Finnemore (1999) found little research into the day-to-day lives of the organizations as research placed greater emphasis on economic or political implications. Though cross-cultural interactions are nothing new (Magala, 2005), there has been more focus on them within business and organization research since the 1950s as rapid development in infrastructure and technology have made the world smaller and opened up all nations to the production and market opportunities of firms from all over the world, we have seen the interactions between

people and organizations become increasingly complicated as we are exposed to other perspectives, technologies, cultures and understandings which may be very different from those that we have grown up with (Merchant, 2012; Morgan, 2014). This has been particularly important to human resource management, which has changed to incorporate the new multicultural makeup that is a hallmark of the organization in the modern world (Edwards and Rees, 2010; Yu et al., 2014).

Moua (2010) speaks of the increasing importance of culturally intelligent leadership in the modern world built around what Den Dekker (2016) calls a “global mindset” required by those entering the borderless world of international business and trade. Conversely, those with a “local mindset” (Den Dekker, 2016) may see the cultural boundaries of the globalized world as barriers to be brought into line with those from their own country. The ability to navigate these intercultural waters require “transcultural competence” (Wildman et al, 2016). Magala (2005) warns against over-simplifying cross-cultural competence and reducing it to simply doing business with non-Western entities; it is far more complex. In highlighting the numerous factors involved in successful cross-cultural organizational leadership, Gelfand et al. (2007) draw attention to changes in cross-cultural organizational behaviours, for instance a shift from an old-fashioned expatriate attitude to one which requires closer attention to the local contexts.

South Korean people offer both subtle and more obvious differences in their cultural backgrounds that influence the way in which they interact with those from other countries and cultures. Leaders and managers working with colleagues from this country will need a grasp of different mindsets and customs that permeate daily life (Cho and Yoon 2010; Lee, 2001; De Mente, 2017) in order to successfully navigate the journey through the organizational landscape of these diverse countries. Educational organizations have grown by a large number in South Korea over the last two decades and this has resulted in more research being needed on the interactions between South Koreans and those from elsewhere. Hofstede’s cultural dimension analysis displays significant differences between South Korea and, for a Western example, the United Kingdom in a range of areas, indicating that there is a learning process necessary for both sides when people from the West and South Korea work together. To offer an example: South Korean organizations are very traditional and hierarchical in structure with great importance placed on the ages of the collaborators in a group. This is vital in understanding how to contribute and speak within the group. Thus, a simple task to work in a small group with colleagues on a project – a relatively straightforward undertaking in a Western organization – becomes a nuanced and complex problem as Korean staff begin to calculate the age, experience and social position of those involved before being able to make any contribution (Kohls, 2001). This, and similar examples, serve to highlight the complexity of power and influence within organizations in South Korea and how these intricacies might play out in cross-cultural organizations.

Clegg et al. (2006) propose that power is linked to efficiency and control within an organization. In the modern era, this has come to mean different things: when thinking of power, for example, we may consider labour relations or financial comparisons. Moreover, at the time when House (1991) gave us a distinction between mechanistic organizations which concentrate their power in leadership at the top and organic organizations which distribute leadership throughout the organization, cultural aspects were not factored in. As we begin to revisit power research and studies, we are now able to add to these ideas with cultural considerations. In cross-cultural organizations, whilst the founding concepts of power are present, another layer is added – this includes aspects of culture, customs and habits (Den Dekker, 2016). Daily collaboration with those from different cultures can be both a means of increased efficiency or profit or may mean frustration and misunderstandings. Coleman and Ferguson (2014) believe that despite the many negative connotations around the many nuanced understandings of power within organizations, any conflict can be used for good and be of a benefit to the organization. Organizational and individual concepts of power may vary from culture to culture and firms working in cross-cultural contexts will need to build in strategic consideration to the multi-faceted understandings of power that will exist across a global organization. This new focus on the development relationships and understanding within the complexity of international interactions ties in with the findings of Bal et al. (2008) who discovered that the power of relationships was considered to be the greatest source of power in effective leadership.

The rise of the international school and international education organizations has been a steady trend over the last two decades (Hayden, 2006) and shows no signs of letting up. Educational organizations operating in South Korea will need to successfully bring together cultures from their host countries and the cultural traits and social conditioning that their communities carry with them when they move to the school to work or study. Amongst others, Bailey (2015) and Bunnell (2017) have discussed issues around local and expatriate culture and integration in the international school environment, though not specifically about South Korea and thus there may exist a gap in the research knowledge to be filled. Busher (2006) has stated that schools are unique organizations with complex systems of micro-politics and culture that dictate power flow within them. It might be said that adding the international context to this complex system will increase the complexities involved. Benson (2011) hints at cultural differences as a key factor in chief administrator turnover at international schools and, similarly, Odland and Ruzicka (2009) found cultural misunderstandings or differences contribute to teacher turnover in international schools. In Korean higher education institutions, the great degree of importance placed upon Confucian values impacts upon the organizational culture of the institution and impacts upon the perceptions of leadership, with links to the power and employee satisfaction within the organization (Lee, 2001).

Methodology

The project will make use of qualitative data in order to make sense of the complicated picture of cross-cultural leadership. It is hoped that these individual conversations with key players in relevant organizations will add depth

and richness to the study. Whereas a survey or questionnaire can help in collecting a large amount of data points that when correlated or analysed might help us to form a picture of a pattern or trend, interviews add substance to and help to support theories with real-world examples from those who have lived and experienced in a real-world setting the ideas and concepts that the study draws on (Cohen et al., 2007). It is intended that both Korean and expatriate staff members, from a variety of positions and institutions will be sought for interview in order to give a balanced picture of the issues around power within a cross-cultural educational organization. The interviews will be semi-structured; a series of topics that are to be discussed will form the agenda for the sessions. This offers flexibility to both the interviewee and the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007; Dawson, 2002) which gives us the advantage of enriching the study with more in-depth probing. An initial email requesting an interview either face-to-face (where possible) or via video or telephone will be sent and an interview schedule will be drawn up.

Issues with interviews are that they are potentially time-consuming, particularly in the need to transcribe and write-up. To that end, permission will be sought to record the interviews and transcription software will be utilized in order to speed up this process. Analysis of the interviews will consist of selecting evidence from different interviewees that either: a) creates a pattern or trend that matches with other responses and/or b) adds significant evidence to the study and helps to make a contribution to the value of the overall study. In seeking to avoid bias within the interview, it is important for the researcher to remain vigilant against their own views creeping into the interview process (Bell, 2014).

Timeline

Jan/Feb 2018 – Submission of proposal

Feb/Mar 2018 – Further reading and background analysis

Mar/Apr 2018 – Data collection & analysis

Apr/May 2018 – Writing up of dissertation

May/June 2018 – Final draft and submission

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