Article

Situational Leadership's Role in Shaping Teacher Autonomy Support in Tongren City, China

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Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between school leaders' situational leadership practices and the autonomy support afforded to teachers. The profile of respondents includes a diverse group of teachers varying in sex, years of service, and highest educational attainment. The assessment of situational leadership practices reveals that these practices are generally perceived as effectively implemented. Differences in the assessment based on sex, length of service, and educational attainment were found to be statistically insignificant. Teachers' perceptions of autonomy support were also generally positive, particularly in areas such as responsive teaching and providing rationale, although there is room for improvement in minimizing control and pressure. There are not significant differences found in the perceived autonomy support based on sex, length of service, or educational attainment. The correlation analysis shows a nuanced relationship between situational leadership practices and autonomy support. The study concludes that while overall situational leadership practices do not significantly correlate with general autonomy support, specific practices can influence certain dimensions of autonomy. Recommendations include improving communication, fostering a supportive environment, increasing opportunities for teacher autonomy, and providing clear rationales for decisions. These insights aim to enhance leadership development programs and contribute to creating a more empowering educational environment for teachers.

Keywords: situational leadership theory; situational leadership practices; teachers' autonomy support

1. Introduction

Situational leadership, a dynamic and adaptable leadership model that tailors leadership styles to specific situations and the readiness levels of individuals, has gained prominence as a guiding framework in educational contexts worldwide. In the context of education, situational leadership is not only essential for school administrators and leaders but also has profound implications for shaping the support and autonomy granted to teachers within the system.

The purpose of this research aims to delve into the intricate relationship between situational leadership and teacher autonomy support. Drawing upon a body of relevant literature and empirical evidence from various studies, this study seeks to explore how situational leadership practices, as informed by the Situational Leadership Theory (SLT), influence the degree to which teachers provide autonomy support to their students.

The Situational Leadership Theory, originally developed by Hersey and Blanchard, posits that effective leadership hinges on the leader's ability to adapt their leadership style to match the readiness or maturity level of their followers [1]. The theory delineates four primary leadership styles, namely Directing, Coaching, Supporting, and Delegating, each characterized by varying levels of guidance and support provided by the leader. As such, it offers a flexible framework for educational leaders to adjust their leadership behaviors based on the specific needs and capabilities of their teaching staff.

Within the educational context, teacher autonomy support is a pivotal construct rooted in self-determination theory [2]. It pertains to the extent to which teachers encourage students' independence, provide a rationale for learning tasks, allow for student initiative, and respect individual perspectives. Research has demonstrated that teacher autonomy support significantly impacts student engagement, well-being, and academic outcomes [3].

The researcher posits that situational leadership and teacher autonomy support hold significant relevance in the field of education as they profoundly impact teaching and learning outcomes. Situational leadership, with its emphasis on adapting leadership styles based on the readiness of individuals, provides a framework for teachers to tailor their instructional approaches to match students' unique needs [4]. This approach fosters personalized education, allowing educators to differentiate their teaching methods and create a more engaging and effective learning experience [5,6]. Furthermore, teacher autonomy support, rooted in self-determination theory, plays important role in enhancing student motivation, well-being, and academic success. When teachers provide choices, acknowledge students' perspectives, and minimize control, it promotes intrinsic motivation, reduces stress, and contributes to a positive classroom environment. Additionally, situational leadership extends beyond the classroom, benefiting school administrators in guiding and supporting their teaching staff effectively [7].

In general, these concepts not only shape the quality of education but also influence teacher satisfaction, retention, and resource allocation, making them crucial components of educational success. By empowering teachers and allowing them to have a voice in decision-making processes, school administrators can create a collaborative and supportive work environment [8]. This promotes a sense of ownership and investment in their work, leading to increased job satisfaction and teacher retention. Moreover, when educators feel valued and supported, they are more likely to invest their time and energy into professional development, ultimately befitting both the individual teacher and the overall educational system [9,10]. Therefore, incorporating these concepts into educational practices is essential for creating a successful and thriving learning community.

2. Method

2.1. Quantitative Comparative Correlational Research

A quantitative comparative correlational research design will be employed to address the research questions and problems identified in this study. This design is chosen for several compelling reasons, rooted in the nature of the research problems at hand [11].

Firstly, the research aims to assess the relationship between two sets of variables: the school leaders' situational leadership practices and the extent of autonomy support afforded to teachers. Quantitative research is well-suited for this purpose as it allows for the systematic collection of numerical data that can be statistically analyzed to establish correlations and patterns [12,13]. By employing a quantitative approach, the study can provide empirical evidence of the potential relationship between these variables, offering a clearer understanding of their interplay.

Secondly, the research seeks to compare and analyze various demographic profiles of teacher-respondents, including factors such as sex, years in service, and highest educational attainment. A comparative research design is essential to evaluate whether significant differences exist among these profiles concerning their assessments of leadership practices and autonomy support. This design allows for the identification of patterns and variations across different teacher profiles, shedding light on potential disparities and trends within the educational institution [14].

Finally, the research intends to propose a Leadership Development Program based on the research findings [15]. A quantitative approach is crucial in justifying the need for such a program. By quantifying the relationships between leadership practices, autonomy support, and teacher profiles, the study can provide empirical evidence to support the

development of a targeted program. This evidence-based approach enhances the program's credibility and relevance, ensuring that it addresses specific areas of improvement and leverages strengths within the institution effectively.

Therefore, the choice of a quantitative comparative correlation study design is imperative for this study as it aligns with the research problems' nature and objectives. It enables the systematic investigation of relationships, the comparison of teacher profiles, and the evidence-based development of a Leadership Development Program to address identified needs within the educational institution in Tongren City, China.

3. Result

The analysis of correlations between school leaders' situational leadership practices and the autonomy support provided to teachers presents mixed results, as shown in Table 1. The correlation coefficients (r) and significance values (Sig.) highlight these relationships. For Directing and its connection to Choice and Decision-Making, the r value is -0.030 with a Sig. value of 0.604, supporting the null hypothesis and showing no significant correlation. Regarding Acknowledgment of Feelings and Perspectives, the r value is -0.113 with a Sig. value of 0.050, rejecting the null hypothesis and revealing a significant negative relationship. This indicates that increased directive leadership aligns with reduced acknowledgment of teachers' feelings and perspectives. For Minimized Control and Pressure, the r value is -0.100 with a Sig. value of 0.083, supporting the null hypothesis with no significant association. Similarly, Fostering Intrinsic Motivation (r = 0.032, Sig. = 0.575), Providing Rationale (r = -0.020, Sig. = 0.728), and Responsive Teaching (r = -0.034, Sig. = 0.555) also support the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationships. Promoting Self-Evaluation and Reflection, with an r value of 0.045 and a Sig. value of 0.432, further confirms no significant correlation. However, Positive Feedback and Encouragement demonstrate an r value of 0.117 and a Sig. value of 0.041, rejecting the null hypothesis and indicating a significant positive relationship. This suggests that directive leadership is associated with greater positive feedback and encouragement.

Table 1. Correlation Between School Leaders' Situational Leadership Practices and Autonomy Support Afforded to Teachers.

Situational Leadership Practices	Autonomy Support Afforded to Teachers	Computed r	Sig.	Decision	Interpretation
Directing	Choice and Decision-Making	-.030	.604	Accepted	Not Significant
	Acknowledgment of Feelings and Perspectives	-.113	.050	Rejected	Significant
	Minimized Control and Pressure	-.100	.083	Accepted	Not Significant
	Fostering Intrinsic Motivation	.032	.575	Accepted	Not Significant
	Providing Rationale	-.020	.728	Accepted	Not Significant
	Responsive Teaching	-.034	.555	Accepted	Not Significant
	Promoting Self-Evaluation and Reflection	.045	.432	Accepted	Not Significant
	Positive Feedback and Encouragement	.117*	.041	Rejected	Significant
Coaching	Choice and Decision-Making	-.004	.952	Accepted	Not Significant
	Acknowledgment of Feelings and Perspectives	.071	.220	Accepted	Not Significant
	Minimized Control and Pressure	-.035	.542	Accepted	Not Significant

	Fostering Intrinsic Motivation	.019	.737	Accepted	Not Significant
	Providing Rationale	-.021	.714	Accepted	Not Significant
	Responsive Teaching	.008	.884	Accepted	Not Significant
	Promoting Self-Evaluation and Reflection	-.078	.175	Accepted	Not Significant
	Positive Feedback and Encouragement	-.010	.861	Accepted	Not Significant
Supporting	Choice and Decision-Making	-.002	.973	Accepted	Not Significant
	Acknowledgment of Feelings and Perspectives	-.001	.991	Accepted	Not Significant
	Minimized Control and Pressure	.020	.735	Accepted	Not Significant
	Fostering Intrinsic Motivation	.000	.995	Accepted	Not Significant
	Providing Rationale	-.043	.452	Accepted	Not Significant
	Responsive Teaching	-.043	.459	Accepted	Not Significant
	Promoting Self-Evaluation and Reflection	-.021	.719	Accepted	Not Significant
	Positive Feedback and Encouragement	-.004	.949	Accepted	Not Significant
Delegating	Choice and Decision-Making	.003	.963	Accepted	Not Significant
	Acknowledgment of Feelings and Perspectives	-.037	.521	Accepted	Not Significant
	Minimized Control and Pressure	.117*	.042	Rejected	Significant
	Fostering Intrinsic Motivation	.001	.981	Accepted	Not Significant
	Providing Rationale	.047	.416	Accepted	Not Significant
	Responsive Teaching	-.053	.355	Accepted	Not Significant
	Promoting Self-Evaluation and Reflection	.100	.084	Accepted	Not Significant
	Positive Feedback and Encouragement	-.104	.070	Accepted	Not Significant
Communicating	Choice and Decision-Making	.082	.154	Accepted	Not Significant
	Acknowledgment of Feelings and Perspectives	.156**	.007	Rejected	Significant
	Minimized Control and Pressure	-.172**	.003	Rejected	Significant
	Fostering Intrinsic Motivation	-.036	.528	Accepted	Not Significant
	Providing Rationale	.005	.938	Accepted	Not Significant
	Responsive Teaching	.056	.335	Accepted	Not Significant
	Promoting Self-Evaluation and Reflection	-.047	.419	Accepted	Not Significant
	Positive Feedback and Encouragement	-.039	.504	Accepted	Not Significant
Overall Situational Leadership Practices	Overall Autonomy Support Afforded to Teachers	-.027	.636	Accepted	Not Significant

In terms of the analysis of the correlation between school leaders' situational leadership practices in terms of Coaching and the autonomy support afforded to teachers shows no statistically significant relationships across all examined dimensions. For the dimension of Coaching and its correlation with Choice and Decision-Making, the computed r

value is -0.004 with a significance value of 0.952. This leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationship between these variables. Regarding Acknowledgment of Feelings and Perspectives, the computed r value is 0.071 with a significance value of 0.220. This results in the acceptance of the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationship between these variables. For Minimized Control and Pressure, the computed r value is -0.035 with a significance value of 0.542. This leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationship between these variables. In terms of Fostering Intrinsic Motivation, the computed r value is 0.019 with a significance value of 0.737. This results in the acceptance of the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationship between these variables. For Providing Rationale, the computed r value is -0.021 with a significance value of 0.714. This leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationship between these variables. Regarding Responsive Teaching, the computed r value is 0.008 with a significance value of 0.884. This results in the acceptance of the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationship between these variables. In terms of Promoting Self-Evaluation and Reflection, the computed r value is -0.078 with a significance value of 0.175. This leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationship between these variables. For Positive Feedback and Encouragement, the computed r value is -0.010 with a significance value of 0.861. This results in the acceptance of the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationship between these variables.

Moreover, the correlation analysis between school leaders' situational leadership practices in Supporting and the autonomy support provided to teachers indicates no statistically significant relationships across all examined dimensions. For Supporting and its relationship with Choice and Decision-Making, the r value is -0.002, with a Sig. value of 0.973, supporting the null hypothesis and showing no significant correlation. Regarding Acknowledgment of Feelings and Perspectives, the r value is -0.001, and the Sig. value is 0.991, confirming the null hypothesis with no significant relationship. For Minimized Control and Pressure, the r value is 0.020, with a Sig. value of 0.735, indicating no significant association. Similarly, Fostering Intrinsic Motivation (r = 0.000, Sig. = 0.995), Providing Rationale (r = -0.043, Sig. = 0.452), and Responsive Teaching (r = -0.043, Sig. = 0.459) all support the null hypothesis, showing no significant relationships. Promoting Self-Evaluation and Reflection (r = -0.021, Sig. = 0.719) and Positive Feedback and Encouragement (r = -0.004, Sig. = 0.949) also confirm the absence of significant correlations across these dimensions.

Furthermore, the analysis of the correlation between school leaders' situational leadership practices in Delegating and the autonomy support provided to teachers demonstrates predominantly non-significant relationships, with one notable exception. For Delegating and its association with Choice and Decision-Making, the r value is 0.003, with a significance value of 0.963, supporting the null hypothesis and showing no significant correlation. Regarding Acknowledgment of Feelings and Perspectives, the r value is -0.037, and the Sig. value is 0.521, confirming no significant relationship. For Minimized Control and Pressure, however, the r value is 0.117, with a significance value of 0.042, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis and indicating a significant positive correlation. This suggests that higher levels of delegating correspond to reduced control and pressure on teachers.

In terms of Fostering Intrinsic Motivation, the r value is 0.001, with a Sig. value of 0.981, confirming no significant association. Similarly, Providing Rationale (r = 0.047, Sig. = 0.416) and Responsive Teaching (r = -0.053, Sig. = 0.355) also indicate no significant relationships. For Promoting Self-Evaluation and Reflection, the r value is 0.100, with a significance value of 0.084, which supports the null hypothesis but is near the threshold for significance. Likewise, Positive Feedback and Encouragement (r = -0.104, Sig. = 0.070) shows no significant relationship, though it is also close to the significance threshold.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the correlation between school leaders' situational leadership practices and the autonomy support afforded to teachers reveals a mix of significant and non-significant relationships. In the dimension of directing, there is a significant negative correlation with acknowledgment of feelings and perspectives, indicating that more directive leadership is associated with less acknowledgment of teachers' feelings. Conversely, directing shows a significant positive correlation with positive feedback and encouragement, suggesting that more directive leadership is linked to greater positive feedback. In the delegating dimension, there is an obvious positive correlation with minimized control and pressure, meaning that higher grades of delegating are related with reduced control and pressure on teachers.

For communicating, significant positive and negative correlations were found. Better communication is significantly positively correlated with acknowledgment of feelings and perspectives, indicating that effective communication is associated with greater acknowledgment of teachers' feelings. At the same time, there is a significant negative correlation with minimized control and pressure, suggesting that effective communication is linked to lower levels of control and pressure on teachers. However, no significant correlations were found for the coaching and supporting dimensions with any aspects of autonomy support.

Overall, the relationship between school leaders' situational leadership practices and the autonomy support afforded to teachers is nuanced, with specific leadership practices influencing certain dimensions of autonomy support. However, the overall correlation between situational leadership practices and general autonomy support is not significant, indicating that other factors may also has an impact on shaping teachers' perceptions of autonomy support.

5. Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:
1) Higher school leaders should focus on improving their communication strategies to ensure that staff are kept informed and encouraged to participate in open dialogues. Effective communication can enhance the acknowledgment of teachers' feelings and perspectives, and reduce feelings of control and pressure.
2) While support practices are generally perceived positively, there is room for further improvement. School leaders should continue to show care and concern for teachers' well-being and foster a positive work environment, ensuring that all teachers feel valued and supported.
3) School leaders should provide more opportunities for teachers to exercise autonomy in their instructional decisions, curriculum adaptations, and assessment methods. This can be achieved by reducing bureaucratic controls and promoting a culture of trust and empowerment.
4) Encouraging self-reflection and professional development should be a priority. School leaders can organize workshops, provide resources, and set up mentoring programs that support teachers in setting and achieving their professional development goals.
5) Implementing systems for regular feedback and acknowledgment of teachers' efforts can improve morale and motivation. Leaders should ensure that feedback is constructive and that teachers feel their contributions are recognized and valued.
6) Given the nuanced relationship between leadership practices and autonomy support, school leaders should tailor their approaches to meet the specific needs of their staff. This involves being flexible and adapting leadership styles to different situations to maximize support and effectiveness.

7) Involve teachers in decision-making processes, particularly those that directly affect their work. This inclusion can lead to better alignment with school goals and greater buy-in from teachers, enhancing overall job satisfaction and performance.

8) When implementing new policies or changes, school leaders should communicate the reasons behind these decisions clearly. This transparency can help teachers understand and support the changes, fostering a sense of shared purpose and direction.

9) Develop and implement training programs for school leaders that focus on enhancing their situational leadership skills, particularly in areas identified as needing improvement, such as communication and support.

10) Regularly assess the effectiveness of leadership practices and the level of autonomy support through surveys and feedback sessions. This continuous evaluation can help identify areas for improvement and ensure that the needs of teachers are being met effectively.

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