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"It's more than the money!" How personal and professional attitudes contribute to aspiring school leaders' career development

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Abstract

School principals and perhaps aspiring school administrators are the most misunderstood people in all of education. The general public often believes that these educators leave the classroom for administration because they are burnt out from teaching and/or care about financial rewards or increased salaries (though experienced teachers and assistant principals earn almost equivalent salaries). Arguably, the current research found that aspiring school leaders had profoundly intrinsic rewards for pursuing careers in school administration. More specifically, the research found that self-growth and professional growth had a positive influence on decisions to pursue graduate education, although the effect size of professional growth ($\beta = .34$) was higher than that of personal growth ($\beta = .19$). In sum, an aspiring future school leader who wants to grow has a desire to learn. With intrinsic motivation, he/she keeps learning and improving because it is the right thing to do and gives them a personal sense of reward. Professional development should be designed to meet the personal and professional needs of educational practitioners.

Introduction

In essence, the theory of human capital investment would suggest that rationale people would pursue professional development when the expected returns outweigh the costs of investment in self-development (Becker ,1976). However, returns on continuing education and career training can be monetary and non-monetary (Card, 1999). For some individuals, taking part in professional development is seen as a way of levelling up their earnings or wages (Leuven, 2004). To these individuals, they invest their time and resources in professional development to improve their current skill sets, and migrate to another related job/position or transition to a new career that would land them a high-paying opportunity. Many people, however, become involved in professional development for personal gains, not for economic reasons. These individuals value learning for learning's sake. In other words, they perhaps enjoy learning to learn to realize their potential, self-fulfilment and seeking personal growth (Maslow, 1943). Reasons for investing in self-development include increased productivity, enhanced skills and abilities,

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improved career focus and effectiveness, positive attitudes and mindset, and building adaptability (Mitgang, 2008).

Many occupations offer various job opportunities, career paths and trajectories. For example, a typical private company usually has an organizational chart that exhibits the hierarchy and structure within an organization. Therefore, continuing education and career training in many professions are considered a straight forward career move from one job to another. Unlike other occupations, teachers do not have many routes of career paths or promotions. In some way, teachers' participation in professional development is considered a lateral career move because many teachers still remain in the teaching profession even after pursuing professional development. Nevertheless, advancing to an administrative role is perhaps the next step for an accomplished and experienced teacher. There are various reasons why one wants to transition from teaching to administration. Although being a school leader is rewarding and can impact students inside and outside of their classrooms, they admit it is a demanding job. Unlike other professions, very few people go into education or administration, thinking "I will get very rich." After all, most educators often complain they are underpaid and under-compensated. In Thailand, becoming a school principal is considerably difficult and costly (time-and money-wise). Aside from the certification and licensing process, aspiring school principals are required to earn a graduate degree in educational administration from an institution accredited by the Teacher Professional Development Institute (Khurusapha). While the purpose and content of today's workshops and training programs are redundant and ineffective, graduate education has become teachers' preference to raise their professional growth, ethics and attitudes (Berkant & Baysal, 2017; Glaveski, 2019). Graduate programs that bridge research with education practice can raise well-equipped and qualified teachers and offer them a path for personal and professional success (Sevim & Akin, 2021; Vural & Basaran, 2021). Taking charge of own career advancement and establishing a clear career path should be relevant to teachers' decisions to invest time and energy in graduation education (Sevim & Akin, 2021).

The current research examined how and to what extent personal growth, professional growth, career path and career objective linked to their aspirations for career development (measured by desire to obtain a master's or Ph.D. degree in educational administration). The research findings may shed light on teachers' learning motivation and provide useful information that can be used to increase their participation in other professional development activities. This paper attempted to extend the current literature by proposing that personal pride and career fulfilment, not just monetary rewards, are tantamount to driving education professions to keep on learning and growing. Hence, the main research question was the following: How and to what extent do attitudes towards personal growth, professional growth and career-related factors influence aspiring school principals to pursue a graduate degree in educational administration?

Literature Review

The Importance of Professional Development for Educators

Education should always be an ongoing process throughout one's life. Through continuing education, career-minded individuals can continuously hone their skills and help an organization be more effective in various other aspects of their work. Organizations with growth-mindset individuals become a learning organization, exhibit efficiency and achieve quality performance (Leibowitz & Lea, 1986). In the field of educational administration, it is essential for school administrators to encourage teachers and themselves to pursue professional development.

Some countries have a career ladder system for teachers to climb the rungs. For example, Singapore has three tracks on the ladder: a Teaching Track, a Leadership Track, and a Specialist Track. The Teaching Track particularly allows Singaporean teachers to move from "Senior Teacher", "Lead Teacher", "Master Teacher", to "Principal Master Teacher" (National Institute for School Leadership [NISL], 2019). Similarly, The Teaching Track for Thai teachers who want to remain in the classroom consists of 5 levels: Practitioner Level (K1), Professional Level (K2), Senior Professional Level (K3), Expert Level (K4) and Advisory Level (K5). However, (45.29%) out of 353,611 teachers are K2 teachers and many (32.76%) do not have any academic rank (EEF, 2016). Few teachers have advanced to K3 and K4 levels. See Figure 1.

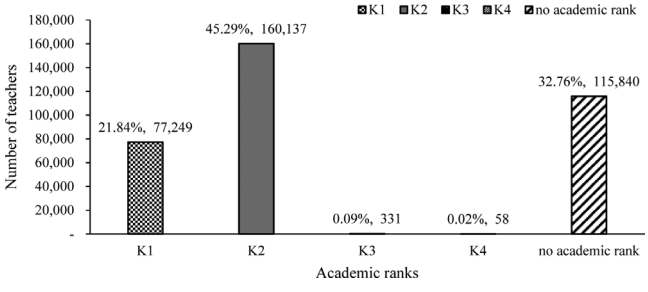

Figure 1 Number and percentage of teachers with/without academic ranks in Thailand
Source: Data from Equitable Education Fund [EEF] (2016); illustrated by the researchers

Figure 1 implies that reaching K3 and K4 academic ranks is quite difficult to achieve because criteria and procedure for promotion require hard work and perhaps many growth-minded teachers leave teaching for administration after they feel stagnant as a teacher. For the latter reason, teachers looking to advance their career path may decide to leave teaching entirely to pursue administration roles. In Thailand, becoming a principal requires that teachers hold a master's degree in educational administration that expands professional skill set and knowledge to meet the challenges of being a principal. Other principals' duties include handling difficult situations with students, creating a safe and comfortable learning environment, supporting and encouraging teachers, managing limited resources, abiding by all the government rules and regulations, and enhancing school reputations (Fourie, 2018).

Graduate education is considered the most common form of professional development. Through semi-structured interviews, Sevim and Akin (2021) found that educators pursued graduate education because they aimed to achieve personal and professional development ambitions and to plan for an academic career path. Respondents reported that knowledge and skills gained through graduate education provided them with the skills of critical thinking and research, communication, and bridging theory-practice relationships. Graduate education also allowed them to gain a recognition and appreciation of their education profession, professional development, self-concept and life in general (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Previous research found that implementing professional development can make teachers become competent future school administrators (Darling-Hammond, 2000). While professional development has been an integral part of law and medical education, the same cannot be said in programs offering traditional academic degree (e.g., education). To make professional development effective for educators, Poock (2001) created a model for integrating professional development in graduate education. Consistent with Sevim and Akin (2021), Poock found that the five core elements of professional development incorporated in any graduate programs should include communication, leadership, teacher and instruction, professional adaptability and self-awareness. Studies have found multidimensional factors that are associated with decisions to participate in professional development (Deci & Ryan 2002). The focus of this present research was on intrinsic personal and professional values, so only selected research concepts and theories related to the two are briefly discussed below.

Personal and Professional Intrinsic Values on Professional Development

The self-determination theory developed by Deci and Ryan (1985) posited that individuals' intrinsic motivation as well as internalized goals rather than extrinsic motivation strongly influenced the pursuit of life activities (e.g. professional development). Because intrinsic motivation is a type of autonomous motivation, it yields positive learning outcomes when educators participated in professional development (Deci et al., 2001; Gagné & Deci, 2010; Zhang et al., 2021). On the one hand, some research has found that teachers' career paths and choices were affected by money and material motives, like other workers in other occupations (Han & Rossmiller, 2004). Other research, on the other hand, insists that decisions to pursue careers in the education field had more to do with intrinsic benefits (e.g. pride, joy, love of teaching), rather than material rewards (Deci et al., 2001).

When teachers leave their teaching careers for administration, they often face harsh criticism such as being unsuccessful in the classroom, burning out from teaching, thinking of themselves or leaving students behind (Will, 2017). Research has even suggested ways in which teachers can cope with burnout symptoms, so they can remain in the teaching profession (Rankin et al., 2016). Santoro (2018) disagreed with such assertation and stressed that labeling a teacher as "burned-out" implies that he/she loses career passions, hope and energy. On the contrary, they may be demoralized, as Santoro coined the term "teacher demoralization." Santoro explained that demoralized teachers want the top leadership position because they deeply care about students and want to do much more for them if given the authority. In fact, they want to contribute to the greater well-being of school agents (e.g. students, teachers, staff, parents, community) (Gardner et al., 2001). Many aspiring school leaders also possess instructional leadership as they want to define school goals, manage the instructional program and transform the school from a workplace to a learning organization (Hallinger, 2005). In this case, aspiring school leaders may decide to pursue graduate education in educational administration because they want to realize their potential, self-fulfillment, and seeking personal and professional growth (Maslow, 1943). Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There was a positive linkage between personal growth and future school leaders' decisions to pursue graduate education.

H2: There was a positive linkage between professional growth and future school leaders' decisions to pursue graduate education.

Career-Related Factors on Professional Development

To understand the full picture of how one progresses in their career, one needs to examine how an individual career path unfolds. As complex as human can be, theorists have tried to explain one's career path over his or her lifetime. Krumboltz, a well-known career theorist, stated that some people do not just sit and wait for something to happen (2009). They look beyond the present and always prepare themselves for unexpected events. Krumboltz's theory (2009) encouraged individuals to be prepared for the rapidly changing labor market by continuously improving themselves and exploring learning opportunities. The theory also offered insight on how people should be ready for managing life transitions and ongoing learning and skill development, which are necessary career management skills. Bandura's social cognitive theory (1982) also attempted to explain how one made a career development plan in a way that fit their personal growth. Bandura stated that individuals' actions related to their career growth and development were results of positive views on their abilities and a network of people around them. Super's life-span, life-space theory (1980) posited that individuals changed and developed, while moving through stages of life. Super's theory reflected today's changing workforce where there are many more career trajectories than in the past. In the context of education, advancing to an administration position may be the next logical career move for an accomplished teacher. Compared to other theories, Super's stages of occupational development emphasized personal growth as the initial steps toward career development. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H3: There was a positive linkage between career-related factors and future school leaders' decisions to pursue graduate education.

Carpenter and Foster (1977) developed a three-dimensional framework to explain factors that impact career choice. The researchers proposed that all career-related factors derived from either intrinsic, extrinsic or interpersonal dimensions. The intrinsic dimension can revolve around decisions and actions related to advancement in career. Hence, it is reasonable to believe that intrinsic motivation and a growth mindset are associated with career-related factors and perhaps strengthen desires to participate in career development. In the context of an educator's career path, teachers with a growth mindset are likely to develop career goals and follow through with plans and actions that make those goals a reality. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H4: There was a positive linkage between intrinsic values and career-related factors.

The present study included intrinsic factors as well as career related factors in the predictive model (see Figure 2). Motivation to participate in professional learning can be approached as a multidimensional construct, implying that individuals may have multiple reasons for pursuing graduate education.

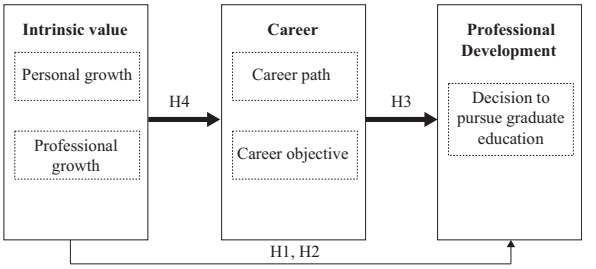

Figure 2 Conceptual framework: Influence of intrinsic value on future school leader's decision to participate in professional development

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

The participants of the study were identified using a convenience sampling technique, and they were the participants who applied for master's and doctoral degrees in educational administration at a Thai university in Academic Year 2021.The sample comprised of 157 females and 58 males. Most of them were teachers with a practitioner level (74%), had 34–64 months of work experience (46%) and performed a managerial role in their schools (48%). The sample size met the minimum requirement for simple path model with 5 variables or fewer (Hair et al., 2010).

Measures

The survey instrument was primarily designed as an institutional survey used to support the department's planning and decision-making related to its student recruitment plans, and accreditation purposes. A total of 330 applicants who applied for master's and doctoral degrees in education administration were asked to fill out the questionnaire during the admission period. 215 of them (65%) voluntarily responded to the survey. The survey questions were evaluated by five experts for content validity using a standardized evaluation form.

The questionnaire asked the respondents why they had decided to apply for the programs. The questionnaire consisted of sections on general characteristics of respondents and their views on their own personal growth, professional growth, career path, career objective, and decisions to pursue graduate education. Each section comprised of 5-8 items, with a five-point Likert scale (5= strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree). Sample survey questions asked the applicants how much they wanted to *"expand their skillset and develop future opportunities"*, *"apply knowledge on the job", "acquire the knowledge to be ready for the new job responsibilities" and "build a network to create new career advancement opportunities."* The internal reliabilities for each section were .47–.81.

Data Analysis

The data were first checked to see if the assumption of no multicollinearity was met. No correlation coefficient was greater than .7, which implied there were no multicollinearity problems in the data. Path analysis was conducted through structural equation modeling (SEM) to test our hypothesized relationships among concepts. SPSS version 22 and Mplus 7.3 were used for data analysis. A significance level of .05 was used in hypothesis testing.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics including the means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha, and correlations of all variables. The relationships between variables ranged from .22 to .58, which were sufficient to continue analyzing the path model of decisions to pursue graduate studies (Hair et al., 2010). All in all, it supported all the four hypotheses. More specifically, *H1* predicted a significantly positive relationship between decisions to pursue graduate education and personal growth. The correlation analysis supported *H1* (r = .39). As *H2 suggested*, decisions to pursue graduate education and professional growth were positively associated (r = .45). The findings also supported *H3* that predicted a significantly positive relationship between decisions to pursue graduate education and career-related factors: career path (r = .40) and career objective (r = .22). The correlation analysis also supported *H4* that predicted a significant moderate association between intrinsic values (personal and professional growth) and career related factors (r = .46 –.63).

To test the explanatory model of decisions to pursue graduate education, a path analysis with SEM was conducted. Personal growth (PEG), professional growth (PFG), career path (CAP), and career objective (CAO) were introduced as factors in the decision to pursue graduate education (DEC). The results of the path analysis are presented in Figure 3.

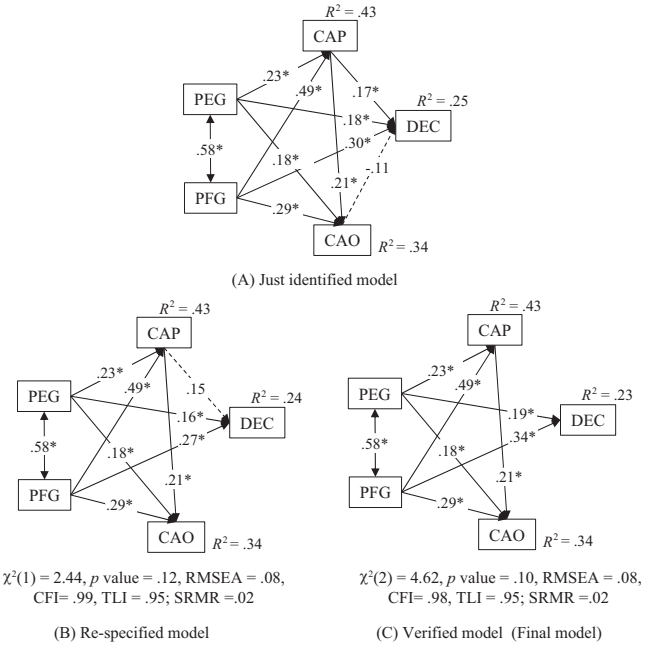

Figure 3 Hypothetical and modified path model diagrams of aspiring school leaders' decisions to pursue graduate education

Note: dotted line = nonsignificant path; PEG = personal growth; PFG = professional growth; CAP = career path; CAO = career objective; DEC = decision to pursue graduate education.
* = $p < .05$.

Table 1 Scale reliabilities, descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Personal growth	4.48	0.43	(.47)				
2. Professional growth	4.08	0.72	.58*	(.70)			
3. Career path	4.30	0.50	.51*	.63*	(.51)		
4. Career objective	3.55	0.60	.46*	.52*	.49*	(.57)	
5. Decision to pursue education	4.52	0.50	.39*	.45*	.40*	.22*	(.81)

Note: Scale reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) are shown on the diagonal. *M*, mean; *SD*, standard deviation.
*$p < .05$.

The first run of the path analysis provided a just-identified model, whose estimated parameters reproduced the sample covariance matrix perfectly (Figure 3A). However, this model may not be ideal since its χ^2 and *df* were equal to zero. In this case, the model evaluation should not be continued since the hypothesis test of statistical model adequacy cannot be tested. To address this issue, Tabachnick and Fidell (2011) suggested to fix, constrain or delete the number of estimated parameters. The next step was to re-specify the model by fixing the insignificant path in the first model (CAO→DEC) to zero. The second model (Figure 3B) yielded χ^2 (1) = 2.44, p = .12, CFI = .99, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .08, and SRMR = .02, which was an over-identified model that reasonably fit the data (Hair et al., 2010). Even though the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value of .08 was a bit higher than .05 (a value less than 0.05 is an indication of a good model fit by many researchers such as Hu & Bentler, 1999), it was acceptable and still a "mediocre fit" (MacCallum et al., 1996). After all, the RMSEA value of our second model perhaps can be ignored anyway because Kenny et al. (2014) suggested that a model with a small sample size and a low-degree of freedom (like our models) did not merit a consideration of RMSEA rule; otherwise, the model would deceitfully appear to be a poor-fitting model. Here most path coefficients in the first and second models were the same (see Figures 3A and 3B). Unlike Model 1, the direct effect of career path (CAP) on the decision to pursue graduate education (DEC) in Model 2 was not statistically significant. The effect size of CAP decreased from .17 to .15.

Following advice by Kenny et al. (2014), this research went a step further by fixing the other insignificant path (CAP→DEC in Model 2) to zero to develop an alternative model (Figure 3C). Consequently, Model 2 (Figure 3B) and Model 3 (Figure 3C) were then compared, using the chi-square difference test. The Satorra- Bentler Scaled Chi-Square Difference test showed no difference between the two models (TRd = 2.24, Δdf =1, p = 1.00). In other words, Model 3 was as good as Model 2. Finally, Model 3 (Figure 3C) was chosen as the final model since it was a more parsimonious model (a model with a desired level of goodness of fit using the fewest estimated parameters). The final model fit the data well with χ^2 (2) = 4.62, p = 0.10 ,CFI = .99, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .08 and SRMR = .02.

Based on the verified model (Figure 3C), both personal growth and professional growth had a positive influence on decisions to pursue graduate education. The effect size of professional growth (β = .34) was higher than that of personal growth (β = .19). Hence, it supported *H1* and *H2*. In addition, the findings supported *H4* that predicted a positive linkage between intrinsic values and career related factors. More specifically, the influence of professional growth (β = .49) was greater than personal growth (β = .23) on career path. Similarly, the impact of professional growth (β = .29) was larger than personal growth (β =.18) on career objective. The overall variance explained in decisions to pursue graduate education in the final model (Figure 3C) accounted for 23 percent.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As school principals and their work are often misunderstood, the present research argued that personal and professional intrinsic values, not just the material rewards, were the reasons behind why aspiring school leaders keep improving themselves through self-initiative professional development. As stated by several career theorists such as Bandura (1982), Krumboltz (2009) and Super (1980), career-minded teachers always explore learning opportunities and look for genuine career progression. The present research supported findings in previous studies that regarded career-related decisions as a multifaceted and dynamic construct (Ryan & Deci 2000). More specifically, the present research found that aspiring school leaders had the profoundly intrinsic rewards for pursuing careers in school administration. Personal and professional growth drove future school leaders' decisions to pursue graduate education in educational administration. Our findings were consistent with previous work by Deci et al. (2001), Gagné and Deci (2005) and Zhang et al. (2021), which found internal sources of motivation including the need for personal growth and professional fulfilment led to desires to learn and grow. The findings were also consistent with Carpenter and Foster (1977) that found intrinsic motivation and the growth mindset intermingled with job-related decisions.

Based on the literature review and the results of present research, effective professional development should be an integral part and happen across the graduate curriculum. Professional development should begin the very first day they enter the graduate program and continue until they graduate. It should be designed to meet the personal and professional needs of educational practitioners. As Poock (2001) pointed out professional development must play a prominent role in preparing tomorrow's school leaders, like it does for law and medical professionals. Educators pursue graduate education because they want to achieve personal and

professional development, so they have positive attitudes towards their profession, raise professional adaptability, have high self-awareness (Poock, 2001), believe in ethical standards and issues (Bellows & Weissinger, 2004), and become specialized in their field to widen employment opportunities (Vural & Başaran, 2021).

Based on the final model (Figure 3C), this study, however, could not establish the linkage between career-related factors and graduate school decisions (*H3*). This non-significant result confirmed what is known: most Thai teachers do not have a clear career goal and trajectory, so they feel uncertain about which career direction to take. Future research may extend this study by reinvestigating the same individuals' perspective on careers to see whether it becomes clearer after they complete their graduate degrees.

Schools and policymakers must ensure that they have the best principals possible. This goal can be accomplished by designing achievable career path programs and realistic promotion routes for school personnel, so they can plan their next career moves. This is to say, goal setting is crucial for professional growth. In addition, encouraging all school staff to continue professional development such as pursuing graduate education may help them visualize their career goals that lead them from one position to the next. This may also prove a win-win situation. By elevating educators' professional status, the profession may become attractive for highly talented and motivated individuals. School personnel with a graduate degree may help themselves and their students create "a learning mindset" and habits that are associated with positive student learning outcomes. It is best to say the influence of teacher professional development is immense.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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