

School as Learning Organisation: The Role of Principal's Transformational Leadership in Promoting Teacher Engagement

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Abstract: This study aimed to examine the relationship between transformational leadership by school principals and teacher activity toward the transformation of schools into 'learning organisations', based on teacher perspectives. A quantitative research study employing a survey method was conducted. The research involved 285 teachers in cluster secondary schools, selected based on a stratified sampling method. The data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results have shown that the level of transformational leadership engaged in by the principals at the respondent schools and the amount of learning-organisation activity by the teachers are high. The results also reveal that there is a significant, moderate, positive relationship between transformational leadership by principals and teachers' learning organization-pursuant practices. Based on these findings, it is stressed that comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the two concepts studied and how they could contribute to school excellence is very crucial. Existing instances of transformational leadership as well as existing learning organisation-pursuant practices should be continuously improved to ensure the sustainability of schools as learning institutions. This would enable schools to cope with educational change and lead them towards achieving excellence.

Key words: Transformational leadership • Learning organization • Educational change • Cluster schools

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalisation, an organisation should become more flexible, responsive and capable of adapting to change in order to ensure its survival. Twenty-first-century society places a greater emphasis than in the past on the ability of every individual and organisation to engage in continuous learning, so that they are able to deal with the rapid changes surrounding them. Globalisation, technological change and uncertainty have been identified as challenging elements with which an organisation has to deal and the success of the organisation in surviving change is measured by its capacity to become or remain a strong *learning organisation* in which the learning of every individual is sustained [1]. Apart from the issues of globalisation and change, the Malaysian education system is also faced with the demands of the country's rapid economic development as well as those of education reforms which aim to improve the quality and standard of the education system through continuous effort. Therefore, there is a

very strong need for schools to change and adapt to their surroundings and develop the capacity of the school and every individual therein to manage change and further the development of the country.

According to [2], it is the responsibility of school principals to develop a form of professional organisation in which all members are able to learn new skills and knowledge continuously, so that they are capable of dealing with change and realising the goals of the country's education system. In line with the needs of education reform in Malaysia, schools should become more effective learning organisations that ultimately increase the leadership capacity and support the personal development of every individual at the institution, including teachers. Teachers have a huge responsibility as change agents and it is very crucial that they be engaged in professional development. This ensures the improvement of the quality of teaching, which ultimately contributes to school excellence [3]. In transforming schools into strong learning organisations, there are several underlying principles which can be practiced by

teachers, including a) personal mastery, b) mental models, c) shared vision, d) team learning and e) systems thinking [4]. These principles, if embraced and practiced, are capable of transforming teachers into a group of more highly knowledgeable, competent and skilled individuals through a continuous learning process taking place at all levels. This should eventually contribute to the improvement of the school system as a whole.

However, the role of the school as learning organisation can only be furthered by teachers if school leaders, particularly principals, are committed to transforming their schools into better learning organisations. The role of the principals in a learning community is to promote opportunities for learning to teachers and students alike. Principals should show a very strong commitment to teachers' continuous learning by giving them opportunities to develop personally and professionally, building a collaborative learning culture, embracing a collective vision and forming a committed team dedicated to achieving school objectives [5-7]. Most education literature suggests that *transformational leadership* is the most relevant type of leadership in dealing with change. This type of leadership is said to be more sensitive to the promotion of organisational learning, building a collective vision and practicing shared leadership. These are very important elements in ensuring organisational excellence [8, 9].

According to [10], it is still vague how principals play their role in supporting the improvement of teachers' instructional practices and professional development/teacher learning. Despite the apparent need for reform, little attention has been paid by educational authorities and school administrators to the issue of how teachers learn and implement new instructional practices. Most principals expect teachers to produce new, innovative ideas, but are not engaged with the learning process themselves. Likewise, teachers have high expectations with regard to student grades, but on the whole hardly develop themselves as learners. Other relevant issues include lack of time for interaction and collaboration, lack of focus on the core business of teaching and learning due to various extracurricular school programmes and teacher isolation from a larger community of practice, all of which have directly affected the quality of teachers' instructional practices [11]. All these constraints have apparently become a hindrance to the transformation of schools into strong learning organisations which regard learning for every individual as crucial and indispensable. Therefore, research in this vein should be done in order to gather information on the

relationship between transformational leadership practices and teacher practices congruent with the development of stronger learning organisations, especially in reputable schools such as cluster schools.

In summary, it is clear that the learning culture in schools in Malaysia has become an increasingly critical issue due to rapid change in this era of globalisation. It is imperative that school leadership play a significant role in promoting learning amongst students as well as teachers. Transformational leadership styles on the part of principals are seen by scholars as the most effective leadership styles in sustaining schools as strong learning organisations. The practice of principles in congruence with the idea of the learning organisation by every individual in a school, in particular the teachers, is crucial in meeting the goals of achieving school excellence and producing the type of human capital required by the Malaysian nation. Transformational leadership on the part of principles and practices promoting the development into or preservation of schools as strong learning organisations are two identified determinants in ensuring continuous school improvement and excellence.

The research presented here examines the relationship between transformational leadership practices and the development of strong learning organisations in cluster secondary schools. *Cluster schools* in the Malaysian education context are schools which have been identified as being excellent within their cluster from the perspective of school management and student excellence. The establishment of schools that will be recognised as cluster schools and the development of already existing schools as cluster schools are aimed at propelling the excellence of educational institutions in the Malaysian education system and developing model schools that can serve as benchmarks for other schools within and outside the cluster. The research was based on the underlying assumption that transformational leadership and strong learning organisation development among principals and teachers, respectively, in cluster schools, do exist and make them able to contribute to the continuous improvement of the schools in order to sustain their excellence.

Conceptual Framework: The conceptual framework for this research is based on a theoretical background of five principles of strong learning organisations [4] and the model of transformational leadership as set out by [12]. The five principles of strong learning organisations (as given above) are personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. [4] has

outlined these five principles as necessary for an organisation to adapt to change and achieve the goal of continuous improvement. The research also focuses on transformational leadership practices among school principals based on the four dimensions of transformational leadership: fostering idealised influence, providing inspirational motivation, creating intellectual stimulation and showing individualised consideration [12]. The research also looks at the influence of the 'selected demographic' factor, namely teachers' subject specialisation, on both practices assessed. It is to be noted that there have not been many studies using this factor to describe the concepts of transformational leadership and the strong learning organisation respectively. Thus, findings explaining the influence of the teachers' subject specialisation may only be relevant in the context of the research presented here.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses a quantitative survey design. Since the research was based on teacher perspectives, the population of the study were teachers from six cluster secondary schools in the Malaysian jurisdictions of Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory and Selangor. The sample consisted of 285 teachers. The research instrument used was a questionnaire which assessed the teachers' perspectives on transformational leadership practices employed by their principles and the teachers' own practices congruent with the development of a strong learning organisation. The reliability coefficients of the instrument varied from. 70 to. 96.

The data collected were analysed using SPSS v. 16.0. Descriptive statistics were used to explain the respondents' backgrounds and the perceived levels of transformational leadership practices and strong learning organization-pursuant practices among principals and teachers respectively. Meanwhile, inferential statistical techniques such as the Pearson correlation coefficient and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) were employed to assess the research hypothesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Transformational-Leadership Practices Based on the Four Leadership Dimensions: Table 1 shows that the level of transformational-leadership practices on the part of principals, based on teacher perspectives, is high (overall mean = 3.72). The second dimension-'providing inspirational motivation'-shows the highest mean score (mean = 3.83). Among the leadership practices highlighted by the teachers was that the principals showed a very strong commitment to the school missions and visions and consistently involved the teachers in achieving them. This is in line with the observed principle of the importance of leaders possessing a clear vision which is embraced by every individual in the school, so that they can have a clear direction and be able to channel energy towards achieving the vision [6, 13, 14].

Meanwhile, the fourth dimension studied-'showing individualised consideration'-has the lowest mean score. This indicates that this particular leadership dimension has been practiced the least by principals (in the perception of the teachers), meaning that principals gave little attention to the human aspects of leadership, such as giving teachers space to have different opinions, or considering teachers' individual needs, abilities and ambitions. School principals should pay more attention to this leadership dimension, because teachers need self-achievement and growth to be fulfilled in their jobs and perform them well. In their role, principals can coach, mentor, facilitate, or council teachers with regard to how to handle their job and encourage them to be creative and innovative. On the other hand, in the same dimension, teachers did perceive that their principals supervised their work in a way that helped them improve their teaching and learning processes. This actually embodies the practice of transformational leadership, in which that supervision by principals is able to benefit and motivate teachers [15]. The teachers also agreed that supervision by principals is a form of additional support given to help them improve their instructional practices and develop professionally.

Table 1: Level of transformational leadership practices followed by principals

| Dimensions | Mean | SD |
|--------------------------------------|------|-------|
| Fostering Idealised Influence | 3.74 | 0.617 |
| Providing Inspirational Motivation | 3.83 | 0.639 |
| Creating Intellectual Stimulation | 3.67 | 0.609 |
| Showing Individualised Consideration | 3.63 | 0.643 |
| Overall | 3.72 | 0.597 |

Table 2: Level of teacher practices promoting strong learning organisations

| Principles | Mean | SD | Interpretation |
|------------------|------|-------|----------------|
| Personal Mastery | 3.88 | 0.462 | High |
| Mental Models | 4.12 | 0.412 | High |
| Shared Vision | 4.05 | 0.413 | High |
| Team Learning | 4.15 | 0.429 | High |
| Systems Thinking | 4.15 | 0.406 | High |
| Overall | 4.07 | 0.371 | High |

Level of Practices Fostering the Development of Strong Learning Organisations, Based on the Five Principles of Strong Learning Organisation:

As seen in Table 2, the level of strong learning organization-fostering practices on the part of teachers is reported as high (overall mean = 4.07). This means that these principles were frequently practiced by teachers in cluster secondary schools. These results also imply that the concept of the 'learning organisation', in the sense of an organisation that learns, which is more commonly related to the context of management and industry, can also be applied in school settings. The findings are found to be consistent with the qualitative findings of [16] and [17], which concluded that the concept of learning organisation as put forward by [4] can be applied in the Asian cultural and educational context.

The pursuit of personal mastery by teachers has shown that they are consistently involved with the learning process and improving their knowledge and skills. This is probably due to the fact that the teachers are aware of the importance of being learners themselves and are looking for strategies to improve their instructional practices. According to [7], personal mastery possessed by teachers can actually help increase student learning in turn. The use of mental models shows a similarly high mean. The teachers were willing to change their old teaching methods and carry out reflective sessions in order to synthesise ideas for creating new learning [18]. In addition, the teachers also learned and changed through feedback from students in class and from colleagues. The next practice studied is shared

vision, which also displays a high mean. According to [14], shared vision is also capable of providing focus and energy for learning in an organisation.

Likewise, the fourth principle, team learning, also shows a high mean. The findings have been able to support the many arguments in the literature that team learning is crucial in creating a strong learning organisation. Several researchers have respectively outlined team learning or teamwork as one of the strategic building blocks in creating a strong learning organisation [4, 19, 20]. The teachers in this study claimed that they were being open and honest about sharing their best practices and information about their evaluations of student performance with other teachers. These practices have been stressed as important in improving student performance and teaching methodologies [21, 5]. This research has also highlighted the importance of collaboration, collegiality and positive teacher perception of their principals as encouraging in creating a collaborative climate in schools. The last principle covered, systems thinking, also shows a high mean. The teachers, to a high degree, were able to perceive their school as an organisation with its own systems and were capable of considering their effects of their actions therein on their students and colleagues.

Relationship Between Transformational-leadership Practices on the Part of Principals and Teacher Practices Promoting Strong Learning Organisations:

Table 3 shows that there is a significant, moderate, positive relationship between transformational leadership

Table 3: Relationship between transformational leadership practices and practices fostering strong learning organisations

| | | Transformational Leadership | Learning Organisation |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Transformational Leadership | Pearson Correlation | 1 | 0.573** |
| | (two-tailed) | | 0.000 |
| | <i>n</i> | 285 | 285 |
| Learning Organisation | Pearson Correlation | 0.573** | 1 |
| | (two-tailed) | 0.000 | |
| | <i>n</i> | 285 | 285 |

Significance level at 0.05

Table 4: Correlation between transformational leadership dimensions and practices fostering strong learning organisations

| Dimensions | Practices | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|-------|----------------|
| | r | Sig | Interpretation |
| Fostering Idealised Influence | 0.525 | 0.000 | Moderate |
| Providing Inspirational Motivation | 0.560 | 0.000 | Moderate |
| Creating Intellectual Stimulation | 0.545 | 0.000 | Moderate |
| Showing Individualised Consideration | 0.552 | 0.000 | Moderate |

Significance level at 0.05

practices by principals and teacher practices promoting the development of strong learning organisations. Therefore, the null hypothesis has been rejected. This shows that when the teachers perceived their principals to be transformational leaders, they practice the identified principles to a greater degree. When this result was further analysed according to the leadership dimensions, it was found that all the dimensions showed the same moderately positive relationship with teacher practices congruent to stronger learning organisations (Table 4). The dimension of providing inspirational motivation had the highest correlation and that of fostering idealised influence had the lowest. The findings clearly show that transformational leadership by principals is the most relevant type of leadership practiced to foster positive institutional change and is able to contribute to the successful use of practices found in strong learning organisations among the teachers.

CONCLUSION

The 'learning-organisation' management approach is capable of making an organisation more competitive and adaptive in response to change. In school contexts, the existence of teacher practices conducive to the establishment of a strong learning organisation and consistently supported by transformational principals will enable schools to achieve continuous improvement and excellence in terms of teacher and student learning. The findings of this research have concluded that there is a significant relationship between transformational leadership on the part of principals and teacher practices promoting better learning in cluster secondary schools. On top of that, high levels of both these types of practices, where perceived to be present by the teachers, have been found to reflect the level of excellence of the schools involved in this research. School leadership, (particularly the principal), play a very significant role in ensuring that the existing practices among teachers are further enhanced and sustained. This is important in order

to achieve school improvement goals. The least prevalent leadership dimension, showing individualised consideration, should be given more emphasis and the other leadership dimensions should be continually improved so that schools can be sustained as effective learning organisations. This is in parallel with the importance of a positive environment in the organisation, which supports the learning process [22]. Thus, a certain amount of knowledge of goals among relevant stakeholders is required in order for them to understand the relationship between the two concepts studied. Aspects of teachers' professional development focusing on continuous learning and improvement of instructional practices should be given priority. Similarly, school principals should be consistently exposed to the best theories and practices on school leadership through courses, workshops and seminars.

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