Voice of Cluster School Students' on Educational Excellence: Programs, Practices, Challenges and the Way Forward for the 21st Century

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Abstract: With the implementation of the Education Development Master Plan (EDMP) 2006-2010, aimed at providing quality education for all children and producing quality human capital for the nation, autonomy through a school based management system known as the Cluster School of Excellence (CSE) merit status was introduced in the Malaysian education system. The concern for high school students to excel in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), Social Science or Arts courses and non-academic performance was of paramount concern to all stakeholders (students, parents, educators and policy makers). For students and parents, this implied excellence in the students' performance and participation in both academic and non-academic programs. For educators and policy makers, the attainment of such merit is indicated by the schools' active participation in academic and co-curricular excellence at state, national and international competitions. Limited literature is available on the concerns and challenges faced by the stakeholders, i.e., students in the pursuit of excellence in both academic and co-curricular programs. This study seeks to address, the said gap on the students' needs and concern in selected cluster schools of excellence in Malaysia. For the purpose of this study, focus group interviews with Form Four High School students (i.e., 16 year olds) from two selected schools were conducted to understand the programs, practices, challenges faced and the way forward to attain such recognition. Written answers were collected from the said students. The data findings indicate the importance of active and supportive participation of school administrative, policy makers and community members; funding for improvement on existing infrastructure; balanced academic and non-academic curriculum; and a state-of-art technological facility as key issues voiced by these students. Students of the 21st century voice the need for harmonious, conducive and open educational environment as the way forward in attaining educational excellence both in academic and non-curricular activities.

Key words: Education excellence, cluster school, leadership, state-of-the-art technology, innovation

INTRODUCTION

Cluster Schools of Excellence (CSE) was introduced by the Malaysian Ministry of Education as a mechanism within the 6th strategic thrust aimed at accelerating the excellence of educational institutions (Ministry of Education, 2006). CSE essentially provides autonomy to schools in decision making and implementing management decisions in both academic and co-curricular excellence. Prior to this, many schools were run by mechanisms that befit the "one-size-fits all" model which does not justify the schools' individual performance and capabilities (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014). By CSE, school administrators are provided autonomous decision making in management decisions in both academic and co-curricular programs. CSE is a merit system that grants high achieving educational institutions like schools, autonomy in administration and extra allocation for advancement of specific fields like academic, co-curricular and sports achievements (Murphy, 1997).

Cluster schools of excellence: This means that school authorities and students together with the policy makers from the ministry of education, decide on their niche area of excellence in academic and co-curricular activities. Thus, selected schools that indicate a proven track record in both academic and co-curricular programs will be provided monetary funding and training in certain specific academic and co-curricular disciplines. Thus, in certain schools, the niche areas selected is specified like English language (academic excellence) and bowling (co-curricular excellence) while others emphasize on religious studies and choir performances. Through, such strategies, it is forecasted that different cluster schools of excellence will excel in different areas of specialization in both academic and co-curricular discipline. The emphasis on certain niche areas is also in line with meeting the National Economic Policy needs on human capital (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007).

Through the CSE, it is envisioned that different schools will have different niche areas in academic and

co-curricular excellence. This form of prioritization contributes to human capital required for nation-building efforts (Ministry of Education, 2007). With the implementation of CSE, all stakeholders (students, parents, educators and policy makers) are expected to be inclusive and contribute actively in attaining, sustaining and optimizing educational excellence by identifying niche areas in both academic and co-curricular programs in respective schools. Academic programs include all forms of formal assessment in public and class examinations while co-curricular programs refer to all categories of societal, club or uniformed body activities at school, regional, state, national and international competitions. With CSE, stakeholders need to constantly monitor and maintain the performance in academic and co-curricular activities.

Literature review

Background of the study: Literature indicates the prevalence of schools with different levels of performance in various academic and co-curricular programs. As such different sets of intervention need to be incorporated to best serve schools at different levels of performance Ministry of Education, 2012a,b). Renewed efforts were set in place through specific outcomes identified in the National Educational Blueprint 2013-2025. The reviewed educational plan acknowledged that all schools have varied levels of performance in academic and co-curricular performance. Through, the implementation of the national blueprint, the ministry is committed in its effort to ensure that there will be no underperforming schools by 2020. Through the establishment of CSE, state, district and school leaders will also have greater decision making power over day-to-day operations to tailor interventions based on the school's context and enable greater school based management (Murphy, 1997).

In fact, effective leadership and management by the professional and classroom authorities such as key administrators like principals and school teachers are considered instrumental in nurturing the success of such programs in schools (Langer, 2000; Soileau, 2003; Andreasen, 2009; Tannenbaum, 2011; Cooper *et al.*, 2005; Kursunoglu and Tanriogen, 2009). The concerted effort of professionals and school community in the management and administration is crucial in enhancing the academic and co-curricular excellence of the school (Cooper *et al.*, 2005). In fact, studies mention the importance of a combination of five patterns of success being "relationships and connections; safety nets and family feeling; data-directed dialogue and collaborative instruction; departments as drivers and collaborative leadership" as determinants of successful and high

performing schools (Cooper *et al.*, 2005; Scheurich and Skrla, 2003). In addition, a local study stated on leadership effectiveness in Malaysia noted that effective principal leadership competency is directly related to the success of a high performing school (Tai and Omar, 2013). Thus, open communication, collaboration and effective leadership are among the key factors pivotal in achieving the CSE status in schools.

In attaining a CSE status, a school has to go through series of criteria to be listed as a cluster school. Among the two main prerequisites involved include: academic evaluation of school standard which must be classified as at least excellent based on the Malaysian Education Quality Standard; curriculum excellence (secondary school) in school where average grades for public examinations are evaluated over 3 consecutive years (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2014). The ministry indicates curriculum excellence as where 80% and above of students passed all subjects in public examinations or indicates increase in academic performance in public examinations in the said schools (Ministry of Education, 2012a, b). These requirements are already made transparent for aspiring schools to plan the route for excellence. As such, administrators are required to identify niche areas in both academic and co-curricular programs.

Cluster school of excellence: Students in CSE schools are driven by the school's culture of excellence to continuously perform their best academically. This culture of excellence is marked by the students need to excel and compete amongst themselves to emerge as top students and contribute toward high academic performance yearly (Malaklolunthu and Shamsudin, 2011). At the same time, students' performance in co-curricular activities is also enlisted as one of the factors to be part of the cluster school. School management are required to provide the space and opportunity for students to plan, manage and control the events and activities either at the school, national and international levels (Ismail and Abdullah, 2011). Students participate, compete and excel in various types of co-curricular activities at both national and international levels. For example, students' participation in various activities such as choral speaking and brass band competitions at national and international level are a few examples to showcase students' co-curricular performance. CSE schools are factored by students' development and excellence in leadership and management activities (Shannon and Bylsma, 2007). Leadership and management activities indicate students' independent participation and management of school-based activities. Students are expected to plan,

manage and control the events and activities either at school, national and international level (Ismail and Abdullah, 2011). Leadership skills are homed in such performing schools as students' have to be plan, manage and perform effectively in both academic and co-curricular activities.

Thus, it is of no surprise that students in such competitive environment are required to perform to their best of their ability in both academic and co-curricular programs. The question remains, however, is whether students, who are instrumental in attaining the merit status for their respective schools are provided with adequate program, support, facilities and environment to attain such merit. Thus, the research objective in this study is to identify the programs, practices, challenges faced and the way forward to attain and sustain such recognition. Thus, the research question in this study is stated as: "What are the programs, practices and challenges faced by students in attaining excellence in both curricular and co-curricular activities in Cluster Schools of Excellence (CSE)?"

The following sections will elaborate the methodology and include the discussion on findings and pedagogical implications in attaining and sustaining the CSE status. The findings project the aspiration, challenges and suggestions by students on the way forward toward attaining educational excellence both academically and in non-curricular activities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purpose of this study, form four students from the Science and Arts class of two cluster schools in the Perak region of Malaysia were selected to be the respondents in the study. Form four students were chosen as the pool of respondents as they were from the non-examination classes. This was an essential criterion specified by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia in order to avoid any form of disruption to examination classes. These students were also eligible to be the pool of respondents as they experienced 1-3 year of student life as full time boarders in the said cluster schools of excellence. Moreover, all of these selected form four students were former public examination candidates who sat for the Malaysian form three public government examination or locally known as the "Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR)". Thus, these respondents had been immersed in the CSE programs in their said schools and would be able to provide feedback on their experiences in both academic and co-curricular participation. It is for this reason that these students were chosen as respondents as they fitted the criteria for the research study.

In terms of ethical sanction, formal written permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Preliminary visits were conducted with the intended schools. The researcher provided the school principal with the official letter of permission from the ministry of education and explained the objective of the study. Once sanction was obtained from the principal, the researcher was directed to the focal teacher-in-charge. Similar explanation on the research objective was provided to the focal teacher-in-charge. The said teachers were informed of the research purpose and two non-examination form four classes were selected. Students were also provided with similar explanation on the research intention.

In this study, a group of 10 students (5 Male and Female) from each school was selected. The names were suggested by the teacher-in-charge of the respective classes. As these students were known to the teacher, the researcher provided the autonomy in decision making to the teacher. These students who met the research criteria were full time boarding school residents in the cluster schools who were from the science, information technology or non-technical stream. These students would be feeder to institutions of higher learning in various STEM, Social Science or Arts program. As these students were former public examination candidates, the researcher was of the opinion that the students would be able to relate to the various academic and co-curricular programs that they had experienced in their school.

Prior to the group interview, the students were briefed on the research objective of the study. Students were informed that they had the liberty to opt out of the discussion if they decided to. Thus, if any students felt that they wanted to retract from the discussion, they had the liberty to do so. The interview session utilized the elicitation technique where students were encouraged to provide their feedback. In this case, all students expressed their interest to share their view on programs, practices and challenges faced and the way forward to sustain the status as a successful school in both academic and co-curricular programs. The interview utilized semi-structured and open-ended questions to facilitate spontaneous responses from the students. A semi-structured interview is less rigid with a combination of "standardized and open-ended questions to elicit more qualitative information" while an unstructured interview, on the other hand, "is a purely qualitative interviewing strategy where questions and follow-up probes are generated during the interview (Clarke and Dawson, 1999). All students were informed that the session was audio-taped for transcription purposes.

The interview session utilized the focus group technique. The technique incorporated creating and setting the environment for the interview, moderating, facilitating, verifying and finally reporting of the interview (Krueger, 2002). Each interview session lasted for about one hour fifteen minutes to ensure feedback from all students. Students were asked to comment on their experience in the academic and co-curricular programs, leadership, management and challenges faced by the school authorities in the implementation of CSE programs. Students were free to provide feasible suggestions for the sustenance of such programs. The researcher encouraged all students to provide their feedback for all questions. Prior ending the interview sessions, the students were provided with the option to add any further comments if they wished to do so.

Through this technique, all students had the opportunity to voice their concerns if they had further comments that may not have been captured in the initial interview session. At the end of the interview session, students and teachers in charge were rewarded and provided with a token of appreciation by the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data findings revealed the need for effective leadership and management, state-of-art technology, infrastructure and innovation, amenities and teamwork as essential criteria required to sustain CSE status. The following sections will discuss each theme accordingly.

Theme; effective leadership and management: One of the main concerns expressed in both of the focus group interview sessions was the importance of effective leadership and management. All students in both groups stressed the importance of leadership and management in ensuring the success of managing academic and co-curricular programs. To students, the school authorities which referred to the principal, student affairs teacher and school administrative staff, needed to ensure fairness in balance of activities in both academic and co-curricular activities was planned for the academic year. This was especially so for students' involved in examination classes.

For example, Student A From School A mentioned, the need for effective leadership in the management of academic and co-curricular programs. This notion is evidenced when the students' reflect on the importance for school administrators to be selective in their decision on students' need for participation in various co-curricular activities at the onset of the students' school and public level examinations.

Student A stated: "There is a need for school principals and administrators to balance and plan academic and co-curricular programs for the year. We should not be expected to participate in various co-curricular programs when the examinations are fairly close in the said month".

This statement reflects the importance for school leaders and administrators to make fair and calculated decisions that contribute to the students' overall academic and co-curricular excellence during the academic calendar. Students' voice the need that participation in various state, regional or national level competitions should be decreased as there was insufficient learning time and preparation for public examinations. Thus, students were of the opinion that the principal and school authorities should plan and ensure students' involvement in academic and co-curricular programs are well dispersed throughout the academic calendar (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008; Walker and Ko, 2011). In other words, participation in various competitions among students in examination classes could be minimalized to ensure that students have sufficient preparation time for examinations. This sentiment is echoed by Student B who stated: "There should be less emphasis in participation of competitions as many hours is spent in training for such activities. Sometimes for non-sports related events, practices go right up to the night, at the same time, we are packed with homework and need to catch up on lessons that we have missed if we are out of class, sometimes practice hours for non-sports events are very long".

Effective leadership is also reflected in the treatment toward Science and non-Science stream students. Student C mentioned: "Principals and teachers must exercise and indicate fairness toward all students irrespective of the streams the said students are in. Attention must also be given to lower performance classes".

The students' notion implies the importance for administrators to ensure proper delegation and treatment of all students irrespective of their academic or co-curricular performance in school. In addition, some students raise the concern on the need for ample notice and time to be notified of participation in a competition. Students expressed the need for prior notification and associate the concern as an indication of effective leadership on the part of the school principal and administrators. In relation to this concern, Student D said: "All students should be told early and not at the last minute of the need to participate in various competitions. Many times, information is related to us at the last minute. This causes problems to us as we are in a dilemma on deciding with completion of written assignments and tests or the need to fulfill our participation in a competition".

Thus, effective leadership and management of students' academic and co-curricular involvement in various competitions by the school principal and relevant administrators is one of the key factors to ensure that schools attain and retain the status as a cluster school of excellence. This feedback confers with findings from other studies which states the importance of effective leadership and authority of the principal as a key factor to ensuring the success of successful schools (Tannenbaum, 2011; Cooper *et al.*, 2005; Kursunoglu and Tanriogen, 2009).

Theme; State-of-art technology: In terms of the state-of-art technology, all students concurred on the need for efficient internet and Wi-Fi facilities and connection. Students express the frustration they face when required to complete a project which requires access to the internet. Students also voice the importance on the usage of electronic gadgets such as I-pads in schools and hostels. There was limited time access to the computer labs and lack of computers in the labs. They also mentioned the advantage if students were provided with ample computer labs and classrooms. In this context, Student E said: learning becomes a challenge and completing homework is affected as there are limited computer facilities in the computer labs. Sometimes during our computer lessons, we have to share computers and take our turns in using the computers. There are many of us but few computers available. This affects our completion of tasks as what is expected by our teachers".

All students expressed the convenience if provided with a laptop each. Student E mentioned that the online systems need to be improved in the school. Better internet facilities enable students to complete their Information Technology projects on time. In this aspect, Student E mentioned: "It is very difficult when we want to complete our assignment on time as the labs are closed during weekends. It is not open when there are no teachers-in-charge. How do I complete my homework? We also have problems in internet connection as the speed is very slow that becomes very frustrating as well".

In addition, to basic internet facilities and faster speed connection, the students also expressed the desire to have schools equipped with other added facilities such as air-condition classrooms; music and recreational rooms for relaxation. The reason for such facilities is essentially, based on the fact that the boarding school students' spend the large majority of their daily life on school grounds except for scheduled breaks in the students' calendar.

Students also spend their weekends at the school. Thus, Student F expressed the said statement: "The school is like my second home. We spend two-thirds of our time at school. It would be good if the school has such facilities like recreational room for us to relax and be able to spend some time playing some musical instruments, reading magazines or doing some indoor games to ease our tension, so we will not feel so stressed".

Students are of the contention that cluster schools of excellence should be equipped with better up-to-date recreational facilities to allow students some form of relaxation and break away from the normal routine of academic or co-curricular excellence. Such facilities will help students to feel more at home as they are required to sacrifice even their weekends at the school. The school should provide conducive environment where students will actually be encouraged to spend their time at the school with no compulsion. The importance of conducive environment is similarly expressed in other studies (Malakloluntu and Shamsudin, 2011; Blankstein, 2004).

Theme; infrastructure and innovation: Besides, the need for state-of-art technology and recreational facilities, the students expressed the need for other well equipped facilities to be provided for co-curricular activities such as proper track and more sports equipment for students to perform practices and rehearsals effectively. This is expressed by Student G who stated: "In fact for our bowling practice as we do not have adequate and ample facilities in the school, we have to rent premises outside the school and this makes it difficult for us to practice or conduct our training for competitions, it would be good if we can have such facilities in our school grounds".

The need for well-equipped infrastructure and facilities in the school is an important factor for the success of attaining cluster school of excellence status. Students should have adequate sports equipment or facilities in order to excel in the said niche areas in their co-curricular program. When students are not provided with the right facilities and equipment, this will create problems for regular practices and training. More costs have to be incurred as the school has to pay for rental of premises as well as transportation costs to the said premise. Students expressed the need for innovation in amenities housed on such CSE schools like creating availability of cricket courts. In fact student H stated: "There should be more funds to have more buildings like more sports and also more coaching facilities for certain sports; more basketball courts; setting up of regular coach and training facilities on school grounds rather than sourcing outsiders and training outside school ground".

Cluster schools of excellence must ensure that all schools must be equipped with sufficient facilities and

infrastructure in order to harness and train the students to their fullest potential. The importance of adequate infrastructure and equipment is resounded in other studies which make mention on the importance of these facilities (Malakloluntu and Shamsudin, 2011; Izumi, 2002).

Theme; varied amenities: In addition, well-balanced and healthy meals are also important facilities that schools must look into to ensure the success of such cluster schools. One student mentions the importance to have "well-balanced meals served at canteens" and the need for "longer operating hours of the school canteen". Student I said: "There should be better meals served, the school canteen should also be open for longer hours, it should also operate after school hours, so that we can have some choice to some light snacks in the evening, it would be good if the operation of the canteen is extended after school hours".

All students expressed the need to ensure and maintain basic hygiene and cleanliness of the toilets which are not well maintained or managed. All students express the need for such facilities to be improved based on the students dependence on such basic amenity (Izumi, 2002). Students expressed the need for regular repair and maintenance of broken doors, leaking faucets or supply of hot water in the shower. Student J stated: "I have to bath in cold water in the early morning and that makes bathing a real challenge when the days are cold or if it rains in the morning, it would be better if we had heaters in the shower". These were among some of the pertinent physical factors mentioned by students as the way forward to achieving a high performing merit status in the said schools.

Theme; comradeship and teamwork: Students also expressed the learning experiences and advantages in comradeship and teamwork gained in such school environment. Student K mentioned that she was grateful for the opportunities and learning experiences as a student in a CSE school. Through such as a system, Student K stated: "I learn to be more independent and have to manage my time efficiently in both academic and co-curricular programs. I am happy to be a representative in sports and aspire to do so until I leave school. I have also made many new brothers and sisters and we have a good time together. We are always excited to meet each other after our break".

Student L added that he had learnt a lot from his teachers who provided him guidance in his academic assignments. He mentioned that many of the teachers had also made a lot of sacrifices as the teachers were actively involved in various programs and activities during the break. To many of the students, the teachers were parent figures as these students spent most of their time in schools. Student L stated: "My teachers and seniors are my mentors. They have given me support, guidance and advice to balance my time as it takes some time for one to manage and excel in both the academic and non-academic programs. I would like to do my best and I am grateful for their time, guidance, teachings and support they have shown toward me".

The above findings indicate that for success to be established and maintained, a supportive and conducive environment is crucial (McGee, 2004). Students indicate the importance of various factors such as effective leadership and management; state-of-art technology; conducive infrastructure and adequate facilities and amenities as elements for success. At the same time, teamwork, support and comradeship among the staff and students are critical support factors to achieve the said success in both academic and co-curricular programs. These aspects have been deemed as the salient features required in sustaining and propelling, the way forward as cluster schools of excellence for the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that a concerted effort is required among all stakeholders to sustain and maintain a CSE status. Effective leadership through clear strategic planning and communication are essential to ensure that all stakeholders are well informed of the school's aspiration and goal. Clearly, all forms of academic and co-curricular programs must be made transparent to all especially students to ensure effective balance in academic and co-curricular performance. Adequate state-of-the art technology and basic amenities for sports and leisure activities must also be enhanced to sustain and engage and inspire students' motivation and interest to excel. For CSE school administrators, the need to engage and encourage students from varied background, i.e., Science and non-Science stream or high to low performers is essential in inspiring the young minds to excel in both academic and co-curricular programs. The prevalence of IT facilities and adequate support in the form of academic and co-curricular amenities are also essential in forging the way forward. The journey to ensure high performance and continued success in both academic and co-curricular programs is a combination of all factors including human, physical, management, infrastructure and moral support from all stakeholders involved. Challenges are rampant but continued collaborative efforts from the leaders, administrative staff, teachers and students, the pursuit of excellence can be enhanced for such performing schools.

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