

Transformational Leaders of 'Zero To Hero' Schools in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the characteristic of transformational leadership in five schools that listed as high performing school in Malaysia from the qualitative perspective. A multiple case study method using interview, document analysis, work shadowing and observation was hired for data collection. Findings of this study explained on characteristics of transformational leadership of the selected schools leaders from qualitative perspective based on four dimensions as suggested by Bass and Avolio, i.e, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation. This study also describes on how leaders in all selected schools practiced 'lead by doing' and able to persuade their staff to envisage and add to the growth of eye-catching futures.

Key words: High performing school, transformational leaders, school improvement, school changes, perspective, idealize

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian school system has undergone few phases of changes to produce a world-class quality education to fulfill the needs of holistic human capital development needed by societies in the field of economic, political and social. According to Cole (2010), schools are partners in the process of problem solving and inspire innovation in the society. Therefore, schools should not be an isolated entity because the development and improvement of these organisations are urged by the social, economic and political forces.

Along the journey, many transformations have been implemented particularly in strengthening the leadership skills as leadership effectiveness is a pivotal aspect in improving the quality of education (Leithwood and Slegers, 2006). In fact, the success of school to change is a result of strong leadership, clear mission and goal, high expectations of pupils, conducive learning environment, opportunities for learning by students and classroom monitoring on regular basis. Previous studies by Levine and Lezotte, Fullan and Hargreaves showed that power-sharing, cooperation and collaboration are among the factors that contribute to school performance. Thus, organisations have to provide effective and transformed thinking about the nature of leadership. A new way of thinking can develop a new way of leadership that aims at achieving the objectives of the organisation and remove the barriers confronting productivity (Arrington, 2010). Transformational leadership became the first evolutionary step away from the old instructional

leadership model that operated under a clear hierarchy with administrators at the top and students below (Button, 2003). Empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated that transformational leadership could produce positive results such as leadership effectiveness, development of organizational citizenship behavior, follower commitment to the leader and the organization, as well as follower satisfaction on the job (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Gillespie and Mann, 2004; Rowold and Heinitz, 2007). Northouse (2001), by reviewed 39 studies related to transformational leadership and found that those who practice transformational leadership are more successful leaders and have better work outcomes. The result can be applied to both high-and low-level leaders in the public and private sectors (Northouse, 2001). Thus, it can be advantageous for leaders to apply the transformational approach in the workplace.

The dimensions of transformational leadership:

Transformational leadership is defined as a process that changes and transforms individuals and refers to as a skill to get people to wish for change to improve and to be led (Northouse, 2001). Thus, a transformational leader can bring success for a company by valuing its associates by expressing and promoting a mission of major organizational change (Basham, 2010). A transformational leader generates an awareness of the mission or vision of the organization and develops employees to higher levels of capability and potential. Moreover, he or she motivates employees to look beyond their own interests towards those that benefit the group (Eyler, 2009; Domerchie,

2011). The characteristics of transformational leadership are the factors that make a transformational leader behave in certain ways compared with other leadership theories. According to Bass and Avolio (1994), there are four domains of transformational leadership namely.

Idealised influence: The idealised influence component of transformational leadership is also referred to as charisma; it encompasses the leader's behaviours of vision communication and motivational language use and it serves as an example of what it means to carry out the proposed vision (Chesser, 2006; Lippstreu, 2010).

Intellectual stimulation: This is defined as the transformational leader's desire to challenge follower's thinking about problem-solving strategies and promote creativity and innovation (Todnem, 2005; Wiestling, 2010; Seaver, 2010).

Individualised consideration: This refers to the leader's actions that guide followers towards reaching their respective levels of potential. In this role, the leader acts as a mentor and coach, offering followers work opportunities that challenge their growth and development. At the heart of individualised consideration is the leader's concern for each individual's unique gifts and talents (Seaver, 2010; Jameson, 2010).

Inspirational motivation: Transformational leaders also engage in behaviours that articulate expectations and show the leader's commitment to the goals of the organisation. These behaviours enhance the meaningfulness of follower's work experiences and offer them challenging goals and opportunities (Hoehl, 2008; Iwuh, 2010; Martin, 2010; Lea, 2011).

Transformational leaders serve as role models for their employees. They hold the admiration and respect of employees who view their leaders as having extraordinary capabilities, persistence and determination (Horn, 2009; Lippstreu, 2010). In addition, transformational leaders inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenges in the work of their employees. They encourage team spirit, enthusiasm and optimism (Horn, 2009). In their study, Bass and Avolio (1994) reported that organisations flourish under effective transformational leaders and that employees report greater job satisfaction. They support the improvement of organisational systems and maximisation of employee talent to increase productivity. Conger (1999) proclaimed that transformational leaders have certain characteristics that form their leadership behaviour, giving them the capability to lead others towards the achievement of the set

organisational goals. These elements include fulfilling employee's self-actualisation needs, empowering employees through intrinsic motivation, exhibiting confidence in the capability of subordinates to attain higher levels of achievement and enhancing collective identity (Iwuh, 2010). The transformational leaders are responsible for producing performance beyond expectations which is reflected in new ways of creative thinking, always seeking for new techniques, opportunities and prefer effectiveness to efficiency (Copper, 2011). Meanwhile Walker (1993) described transformational leadership as the convergence of shared decision-making, teacher empowerment and school reform.

Problem statement and purpose of study: The issue of education inequality in school performance among states, areas (rural and urban) and schools types is one of the main challenges encountered by Malaysian government in order to be an education excellence centre (Malaysian Blueprint, 2013-2025). Though, Malaysian Blueprint 2013-2025 has reported that the gap is gradually narrowing but there is a need for more effort to overcome this issue. As this issue related to school effectiveness, the efforts should be focused on the aspects of improving school performance and one of them is strengthening leadership skills among school leaders.

There is a significant and positive correlation between transformational leadership style and organizational performance (Bodlaand Nawaz). Thus this study aims to (Hassan, 2014) explore the practice of transformational leadership among leaders in 'zero to hero' schools in Malaysia. The term of 'zero to hero' school is used in this study as the schools which were selected as cases in this study started from ineffective schools and becoming excellence under the effective leadership. Since, many previous studies on transformational leadership were quantitative studies, this study aims to provide the qualitative sight of transformational leadership and it is hope to serve as a reference to other Malaysian school leaders in assisting them to improve their school performance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is an exploratory qualitative study that utilized multiple case studies method using a few data collection techniques. According to Krathwohl (1998) and Yin (2003), this method allows a thorough study on the particular cases by maintaining the holistic and meaningful characteristics of the actual situation. A few data collection techniques were hired, namely.

Interviews which was conducted in two ways: Personal interview guided by interview guidelines and protocol that developed based on literature reviews on transformational leaders. Follow-up interviews by telephone and e-mail for gaining further information of unclear data after the fieldwork over.

Work shadowing: In this technique, researchers participated in every schools event for instance teaching and learning process in classroom, school meeting, training etc. in order to obtain the actual picture of the studied cases.

Observations: To investigate the physical and cultural environment in the schools study. Guidelines and protocols was developed based on the literature review.

Relevant documents analysis: A list of documents that would be reviewed and analysed were identified in advance to enable researchers to apply for assistance from the school to provide it.

The purpose of using a variety of methods to collect this data is to obtain more accurate data in order to identify the traits of transformational leaders in selected excellence schools. Five excellent schools which listed as High Performing School by Ministry of Education Malaysia were selected as cases for this study. For the purpose of data analysis, these schools were coded with SKAT, SKCKT, SKUL, SKSB and SKZ2. The school administrators (Headmasters, senior assistants) and teachers of each school were selected as respondents for interview sessions. The data was analysed based on qualitative data analysis guideline by Miles and Huberman (1994) which involved a few steps of analysis beginning with organizing, summarizing the data, identifying themes and sub themes, data triangulation and synthesizing the data for report writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, all respondents agreed that one of the crucial factors for school improvement is effective leadership. Since, this study is attempt to explain the transformational leadership practices from qualitative perspective, the four dimensions of transformational leadership by Bass and Avolio (1994) were utilised as the main themes.

Idealised influence: This dimension is refers to leader's behaviour as charismatic leader that make them as a role model in the organization (Tickle *et al.*, 2005). This study

revealed that this dimension is practiced by all leaders in respondent's schools based on a few attributes identified, namely:

Extensive personal and professional experience: The finding revealed that, an effective school leader have an extensive experience in managing and leading school. This criterion plays a crucial role in assisting leaders to take relevant and effective actions in improving their school performance. R2 in SKAT explained that, "my headmaster is able to influence us to work together to improve our school performance as he is has a lot of experience that he willing to share in school management. He always give us relevant input for doing our work effectively". Furthermore, a leaders life experiences also create the personal capacity they need to lead.

Gentle but firm leader: Respondents in all schools stated that their leaders are gentle but firm in managing the organization. Based on interview's findings, almost all respondents praise their headmaster for having this attitude. As described by R2 in SKZ2 that, "we have a great headmaster who gentle but firm. She is motherly and values her employees. She is a hardworking person. I really amaze her". This statement was also supported by R3 in SKZ2 who explained that "she is a stern, hard-working and strong supporter to her staff. She will continue to criticize when necessary and kind hearted". The same feeling was also expressed by R2 in SKSB who stated that "my headmaster is a great headmaster. He is really good and soft spoken. He was not an assertive person". R3 in SKSB also agreed with the explanation and added, "The headmaster always give a 100% trust to teachers, fatherly. He does not put pressure on teachers".

'Thinking out of the box': According to the interviewees, the finding shows that the SKUL's headmaster is always trying to 'think out of the box' and be different from other schools especially in implementing compulsory programs and activities that directed by Ministry of Education. For instance, he branded every educational program with attractive name and used different mechanism to develop school-house relationship. R1 SKUL explained that "our headmasters will focused on three aspects in managing school namely this school is using the Blue Ocean strategy; brand all school's programs with attractive name and using the Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) as a partner and driving force". R2 SKUL added that, "all of this school programs are from him. He is concern with branding. He called extra class as 3 in 1 program. And for English program, he called it as Elite English. Every program has its own name". Furthermore, R3 SKUL also

explained that the headmaster will always try to implement attractive program in name and techniques to improve student's performance. He said, "for example in 3 in 1 program is for UPSR students. There are three teachers for 1 subject. Every teacher will use their own style in teaching. My headmaster hopes this program will help students to have better understanding of topics that are taught under this program". Respondents in SKUL also agreed that by giving attractive brand to each school program, it will give different perspective to students, teachers and local community towards the program and will be able to increase the participation of students, teachers and community in the program.

Transforming school's deficiency into school's distinction: Among five cases in this study, two of them are schools in rural areas, i.e., SKUL and SKSB. Thus, they encountered with infrastructure deficiency that challenge them in providing better educational opportunity to their students. The first case is SKUL that located in remote area and its students are Ibanese. This school is well known as English spoken students though they came from low SES family and native speaker of Iban language. At the initial stage, this school has many disadvantages such as located in the middle of the jungle, with no access roads, lack of facility and infrastructures and the students came from low socio economic status family (Ismail and Abdullah, 2012). In this situation, the aspiration to develop English language skill among student is very challenging as the schools lack facilities. However, these disadvantages had challenged the headmaster to manouvre a new creative way to promote English language among SKUL students. According to R3 SKUL, "it started with English Day and English Week programs. At the beginning, students don't dare to speak even a word during the program. So, our headmaster tried to motivate them by giving reward for those who dare to use English and starting from there the culture developed". From researcher's observation, this culture is well developed among SKUL's students. They enjoy speaking in English, not only among themselves but to the visitors as well. And, this culture is now becoming one of the SKUL's strength and its niche area as High Performing School.

For SKSB, the name of 'school with no staff room' has become its idiosyncrasy. This school had encountered with lack of space problem that hinders teachers for having a nice and comfortable staff room. However, the headmaster tried to find the best way to transform this weakness into a positive program that is beneficial to the teachers as well as students. Thus, the program of 'colleagues monitoring' was introduced in this

school. R2 SKSB explained that, "the unique nature of our school is there is no staff room here. Teachers are always in the classroom. If you walk around this school, you can see there are two tables provided behind every class. The tables are for teachers who don't have any class at certain period to come and assist their colleagues either in class control or monitor the teaching process". According to R1 SKSB, "the monitoring process by our colleagues really helps to improve our teaching".

Individualised consideration: This dimension refers to transformational leaders who focus on individual needs for achievement and advancement. They do so by coaching and mentoring team members to higher levels of expertise. According to the finding, this study has revealed that leaders in respondent's schools always considered the individual teacher's difference and potential in delegating task. Mutual agreement between teachers and leaders always become the main concern of respondent's leaders in making decision. Thus they use discussion as their main platform to get consensus among school's members. R3 SKZ 2 explained that, "Discussion is important to identify the best person to carry out certain task. Our headmistress often discusses and exchange ideas with teachers. Usually we discuss together to find the best way to implement any school programs". R1 in SKUL stated that his headmaster will always call for a meeting if he has something to discuss with his subordinates. He said, "if there is something he wants to discuss such as a new idea for school program, he will call for a meeting. He will ask for teacher's opinion. He won't make his own decision. If he want to delegate any task he would ask if the teacher can do it or not? He will guide teachers for achieving program's goal. From my personal view, he is not a 'one man show' type of leader. He is really tolerance. That's why we give him full support to improve our school performance". The individualized consideration is also possessed by the headmaster of SKSB. According to what R4 SKSB reported during the interview session, "my headmasters always encourage us to discuss in a small group especially among colleagues who teach the same subject. He wants us to share ideas and collaborate in improving our teaching practice. Share new idea, new pedagogy and new technology. Sometimes he will joins our small group discussion and give us some input".

Inspirational motivation: This third dimension is defined as a leader's capacity to act as a model for subordinates by communicating a vision and using symbols to focus the efforts of followers. In this study, findings revealed that the leaders in studied cases always inspire and

motivate their subordinate to achieve organization goals especially in providing the effective teaching and learning for students. According to R1 SKUL, “headmaster always put students’ needs as his priority. Thus, he allocates certain amount of money for teachers who need to buy additional teaching material. No objection at all. So teachers don’t have any excuses to give their bestest”. Leader in SKZ2 also has the same attitude in her leadership. According to R3 SKZ2, “our headmistress provides all the teaching and learning materials needed by teachers, she ensure teacher’s time compliance and discipline. She constantly monitors the teaching process and shares her knowledge”.

All respondents agreed that their leaders always encourage them to be aware of current trend of education and improve their knowledge especially on new pedagogy trends and educational management. As explained by R4 SKCKT, “definitely, he (headmaster) want us to aware with the changes in education world, keep up to date. Read the materials that he brought back from meeting or conference. Headmasters really give us full support. He encourages us to use our own idea and give us freedom to use our own techniques to assist our students. But we need to inform him so he knows what happening in the school”. The interview findings showed that respondent’s leaders encourage their subordinates to attend external and internal training to obtain the new knowledge or perspective in educational area especially in teaching and learning. As mentioned by R5 SKCKT “usually, the headmistress encourages us to identify expertise from well known institutions to brief us about the new perspective in education. I think this is the best platform for us to get new knowledge to develop our profession. She is really supportive”. According to R2 SKAT, “Headmaster implemented monitoring instructional leadership program in order to assist teachers in this school. He also encouraged teacher’s professional development and put a lot of efforts to improve teaching effectiveness. In fact, currently many teachers involve in graduating program, PGSR, PPG and many more. They get full support from our headmaster”. R2 SKZ2 explained the same attitude of his leader that, “teachers are encouraged to pursue their study and attending courses. We are encouraged to renew our knowledge by attending conference as far as London. For instance Pn Aida went to conference in London on PLC”.

Intellectual stimulation: Intellectual stimulation is demonstrated in the transformational leader’s capability to challenge his or her followers or subordinates intellectually. This causes subordinates to be creative and innovative, knowing that they have the full support of

their leader, both financially and morally (Iwuh, 2010). Findings revealed that their leaders promote creation and innovation to their school environment. Respondents agreed that their leaders motivate them to be creative and innovative in their teaching. R1 SKUL explained, “Innovation is one of the important aspects promoted by headmasters. He encourages us to be more creative in carrying out our duty. He is always happy if we visit him with new idea”. According to respondents in SKAT, “we are encouraged to be innovative. We have our own innovative committee” (R1 SKAT). R2 SKAT added, “the committee act as the think tank to school. We also have think tank group form by parents, discussing on school excellence issue. Besides, we have platform to share our innovation products, at national and district level. Headmasters always welcome innovation especially in teacher’s pedagogy and teaching material”. R1 SKZ2 stated that “headmaster will give her support to teacher for innovation activities, she advises, give financial assistant if needed”. R4 SKCKT, “headmaster gives us her support. We discuss together on any innovative product by teachers. For example, we have COSME Program (Construction of Sentences Made Easy) which developed by our English teachers. We propose this program for innovation competition at district and national level. Headmaster really encourages innovation among teachers”. Meanwhile, in SKSB, innovation in teaching viewed as one of the changes that can bring about by teachers in assisting student in teaching and learning process. According to R1 SKSB, “headmasters always give us opportunity to bring any changes in our teaching process as long as it beneficial to our students. He just wants to make students enjoy their learning. In this school, we also set KPI and we have guideline for it. Headmasters always remind us that innovation is for our career development as well. It becomes value added to us”. In SKSB, teachers also encouraged to hunt for a new knowledge by attending external courses and conferences.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to examine the transformational leadership from qualitative perspective among leaders (headmasters) in five selected primary schools in Malaysia that are listed among the high performing schools in Malaysia. The findings revealed that all leaders posses four main qualities of transformation leadership as suggested by Bass and Avolio (1994), i.e., idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration and inspirational motivation. According to respondent’s description their

leaders lead by example and manage to create valuable and positive change in their followers, enhance motivation, morale and performance of teachers through a variety mechanism. These include connecting the sense of identity and self to the mission and the collective identity of the organization, being a role model for followers that inspires them, challenging followers to take greater ownership of their work and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of followers, so the leader can align followers with tasks that optimize their performance. This finding is consistent with the previous study by Northouse (2001), Basham (2010), Domerchie (2011) that transformational leadership have a major impact to the organizational performance as the leaders are those who guide the staff towards attaining their personal stages of potential (Seaver, 2010; Jameson, 2010). Via transformational leadership, leaders are able to persuade their staff to envisage and add to the growth of eye-catching futures. Previous studies have also indicated that transformational leadership impacts certain characteristics related to the staff within the institution such as empowerment, commitment, self-efficacy beliefs, job satisfaction, trust and motivation (Hassan, 2014). These characteristics have shown by studied leaders in the present study, i.e., thinking out of the box, gentle but firm in making decision, creative, supportive, etc. Moreover, in most cases, leaders mainly act as instructors. Similar results were found in other studies by a few previous researchers namely Button (2003), Horn (2009) and Jameson (2010). This finding is also supported by Koch who mentioned that many critical issues had hindered the organizational performance improvement such as leadership, customer identification and organisational transformation.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that transformational leadership should be possessed by leader in order to develop trust, admiration, loyalty and respect for the leader in their followers and because of the qualities of the transformational leader, they are willing to work harder than originally expected. These outcomes occur because the transformational leader offers followers something more than just working for self gain; they provide followers with an inspiring mission and vision and as well give them an identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is based on work supported by Universiti Sains Malaysia under Research University Grant (1001/PGURU/816354). Any opinions, findings and conclusion expressed in this material are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect those of Universiti Sains Malaysia.

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