

Leadership for Successful School Reform

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Abstract

In this research paper, the concept of teacher leadership will be discussed in full detail in the context of “leadership for successful school reform”. This research paper will practically discuss leadership as a concept that serves as the main key for the attainment of a successful and effective school reform, and the reasons for this claim will be thoroughly discussed in this paper. In addition, this paper will be presenting a developed coherent picture of the workplace challenges being encountered by the researcher in the present college where he is teaching. Some of the major challenges in the educational workplace that is experienced by the researcher of this paper will be thoroughly discussed in order to lead the discussion on how leadership may be able to effectively solve such issues or challenges being encountered by the teachers in the college where they serve. In addition, this research paper will also be emphasizing on the role of “project facilitator’s” as parallel leaders. This paper will also tackle what leadership is as an

independent concept and what parallel leadership is and how it functions. Throughout the entire research paper, the researcher will be utilizing specific workplace examples on how the abovementioned concepts may be applied in his case as a college teacher in Malaysia. Finally the research paper will be conducting a critical evaluation of conceptualization using readings from the course and other sources as well.

Keywords: *Leadership, workplace, Challenges, Conceptualization*

1. Introduction

The concept of teacher leadership is something that's not new. In fact, for many decades now, there have been many notable so-called "teacher leaders" in every school from every college. Some of these teacher leaders even accepted traditional positions in the schools which they serve such as grade and team leaders, curriculum committee chairs, department chairs and many others. However, with the emergence of the restructuring efforts for teacher and school education, many new leadership roles have emerged as well. But whether these teacher leaders are taking emerging or traditional roles, one common characteristic that they share is that they teach part-time or full time on top of their other leadership responsibilities (Anderson, Asbury, Grossman, Howey, Rentel, & Zimpher, 1988).

Leadership is possibly one of the most over-used and over-discussed concepts from the very beginning. This is because in all areas, organizations, businesses and even colleges and universities, there is a required form of leadership with a set goal of guiding or leading that specific institution into greater heights of success. However, when leadership is discussed in the context of college or university, most people automatically imagine or think about those persons in the school which serve at a high position such as the principals, superintendents and those people in the positions of authority. Even more interesting was the fact that people outside of the universities and colleges misinterpret leadership in a sense that they only attribute it to the school employees who are placed in high positions with the exception of teachers (Wilmore, 2007).

Apparently, the sad reality is that leadership in schools is merely attributed to the school staffs assigned in higher positions and not teachers whom many consider as mere "organizational workers" who simply serve the school and abide by the orders and directions of the school administrators and the school principals and superintendents. However, there has been a recently raised issue or subject of debate which argues that teachers themselves are also leaders in the educational context. This is for the reason that inside the classroom, teachers also execute leadership of the students, leading them to participate in the various extra-curricular and co-curricular activities which they sponsor (Wilmore, 2007). Inside classrooms, it is an inarguable fact that the teachers lead the students to the achievement of academic success as well as help them live better and more disciplined lives in relation to their studies. In some cases even, it is the teachers which lead students to better careers and job opportunities. Because of these considered "leadership" functions of teachers, it is therefore a fact that their means of influencing the whole society in its entirety is something that cannot be denied. However, the ultimate question is does leadership really exist in association to the roles and functions of teachers? Another question is that "are teachers really recognized as leaders in the educational context"? (Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2001; Howey, 1988).

In response to these questions, some universities and schools may argue that in their specific institutons, the leadership of teachers is being recognized (Wilmore, 2007). However,

a follow-up question to this response is that “if teachers are considered leaders in the colleges or universities they serve, how is their leadership exercised and how is their effectiveness as leaders measured?” and also, “how are these teachers’ leadership skills honed or developed further?”. These two questions are only some of the most important questions that need to be answered in relation to the exercise or implementation of leadership of teachers in the universities and schools (Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2001). In this research paper, the reason why teacher leadership is being considered an important topic of discussion is because this concept is being closely linked to school reform, a necessary element in the continuous progress and development of colleges and universities. In the article written by Diggins, (1997) entitled “Reflections on Leadership Characteristics Necessary to Develop and Sustain Learning School Communities”, it was stated that school reforms are very important for all learning organizations because it enables such organizations and school institutions to achieve their future vision of success effectively.

Basically, school reforms lead to important organizational changes in terms of three areas: the systems, the structures and the culture of an organization which in today’s century of “continuous change” must be constantly reformed in order to facilitate growth and development. Without reforms, learning organizations will inevitably become stagnant and will be vulnerable to the many emerging issues that they may encounter in the future. In addition, all learning organizations are expected to continuously develop or increase in terms of their performance and learning rates for without it, such educational institutions will die a natural death. In addition, these educational institutions also need to be efficient in their behaviors and the transferring of their knowledge in order to acquire more insights and enable the stable flow of information inside and outside the organization that is necessary for further learning growth and development (Diggins, 1997). In this research paper, the need for a successful school reform for most universities and colleges nowadays in Malaysia will be discussed in relation to the concept of teacher leadership. But prior to addressing the concept of leadership for a successful school reform, the researcher will first be discussing the workplace challenges that he commonly encounters in his entire career as a teacher in an Malaysian college.

2. Workplace Challenges

The researcher of this paper is currently a College teacher in one of the prestigious colleges in Malaysia, who has been an active faculty member of the college in addition to the fulfilling the faculty duty I have an additional leadership responsibility which is called “assistant coordinator staff development” who is in charge of providing training and assistance to the instructional staff on what effective educational practices also among my schedules as an assistant coordinator staff development are assisting some of my co-teachers in the college in terms of developing or preparing plans which are intended to enhance the academic learning and success of our college students. Some of my responsibilities also include conducting some professional staff development activities for some of my co-staff which help them become more effective and efficient in their college functions. On top of this, I also do a number of administrative functions in the college as my own personal contribution for the betterment of the systems and operations of the entire college.

I consider my present career as a college teacher as one of my most notable career stepping stones, because I am able to maximize all my talents and skills in the service of the educational institution I serve. In fact, in my entire time of teaching in the college, I have already received numerous accomplishments and recognitions. My goal is to utilize my present learning experiences and the degree I am currently taking up which is Masters of Educational Leadership

and Management in order to further grow as an academic leader, not only within the classroom but also outside of it yet within the bounds of education.

However, throughout my early teaching career in the College, I have had encountered a specific challenge in terms of exercising leadership in the organization. Apparently, despite the fact that the College where I am teaching is already an established educational institution that has been in existence for many decades, its reception and acceptance when it comes to the exercise of teacher leadership within the college is still very low. As a matter of fact, a young blood and passionate leader like myself is often ignored when it comes to my leadership inputs because in reality, the college talks about “teacher leadership” yet fail to exercise and develop it. As Senge, (1990) has highlighted, most people in learning organizations do not have a full accurate understanding on what leadership is all about and what type of commitment it requires in order to truly build an entire educational organization.

In addition to this, the college still has a relatively traditional view of leadership in the area of education. They perceive “leaders” as those who are in higher level positions within the organization. They perceive “leaders” as those which energize and motivate people and make important decisions that will affect or create an impact on the entire organization. This reminded me of what Senge, (1990) said about traditional concept of leadership in the context of educational institutions as being deeply ‘individualistic’ and ‘nonsystemic’ by nature. Much worse, some people in the college consider the roles of teachers not as leaders but merely as helpers of the true leaders in the organization who make decisions and direct people on what they should do.

This kind of traditional leadership view has been a constant struggle and challenge on my part since I believe in my heart that as a teacher, I am undoubtedly a leader at least in my own right. My argument with them is that as a college teacher, I do a very important work for the college which may differ from the people they consider as rightful leaders but which I consider equally significant in terms of functions and contributions to the success of the college. I have always believed that even though our students’ parents and even our own co-teachers do not believe in our right to be recognized as leaders, we will always have to fulfill an important leadership role at least in the classroom. In my experience, all my students have always considered me as their leader who not only teaches them but also guides, directs and mentors them in the area of academics and sometimes even outside of that realm. Personally, I consider all teachers like myself as leaders who merely perform other functions necessary for the building and shaping of learning organizations. I also consider teachers like myself leaders possess the ability to build a shared vision for the benefit of the entire learning organization.

Unfortunately, in the college where I am current serving, this kind of leadership concept does not exist. This was especially true during my first time of teaching in the college. Since the college was very traditional, all decisions had to come from the board of directors of the college and the teachers simply does not have the right to make decisions on the kind of learning tools and strategies that they think was necessary and appropriate for the students. According to my co-teachers, this kind of college rule has been going on ever since they came into the school. At first, they too, became very frustrated because the college required all the teachers to adopt only a certain learning style and strategy which, regardless of it working for the benefit of the students or not, has to be implemented. Eventually however, they finally gave in because they did not have the right to voice their concerns. But, in the past two years, the college encountered certain issues with the lack of autonomy and exercise of decision making of the teachers reflecting poor academic performance among the students. This paved the way for the

significant organizational changes in the past two years wherein teachers in the college are now being given the right to choose, adopt and utilize their own teaching styles and strategies that they deem best to improve their students' academic status.

While such changes may already be considered important in terms of the college teachers' exercise of their so-called "leadership" rights and functions, this still is not enough because looking at the bigger picture, the college still does not recognize their teachers as leaders who does not have the right to exercise their decision making in terms of making changes in line with the college's goal of providing the best education in Malaysia.

However, there are other major and the current challenges of the college the college's ability to recruit permanent staff because above fifty percent of the college staff are part time lecture's (college annual report 2014), expensive and hard to get text books in the library to enable student in hence their research capability, also internal politics among others were among the present challenges faced by the college that need to be addressed for the battement delivery of quality education. Apart from the above the college is also facing threat such as Difficulty to build faculty excellence, Students only look at passing not excelling, Pressure to lower entry requirements to boost up student numbers Frustration sets in; good staffs resign.

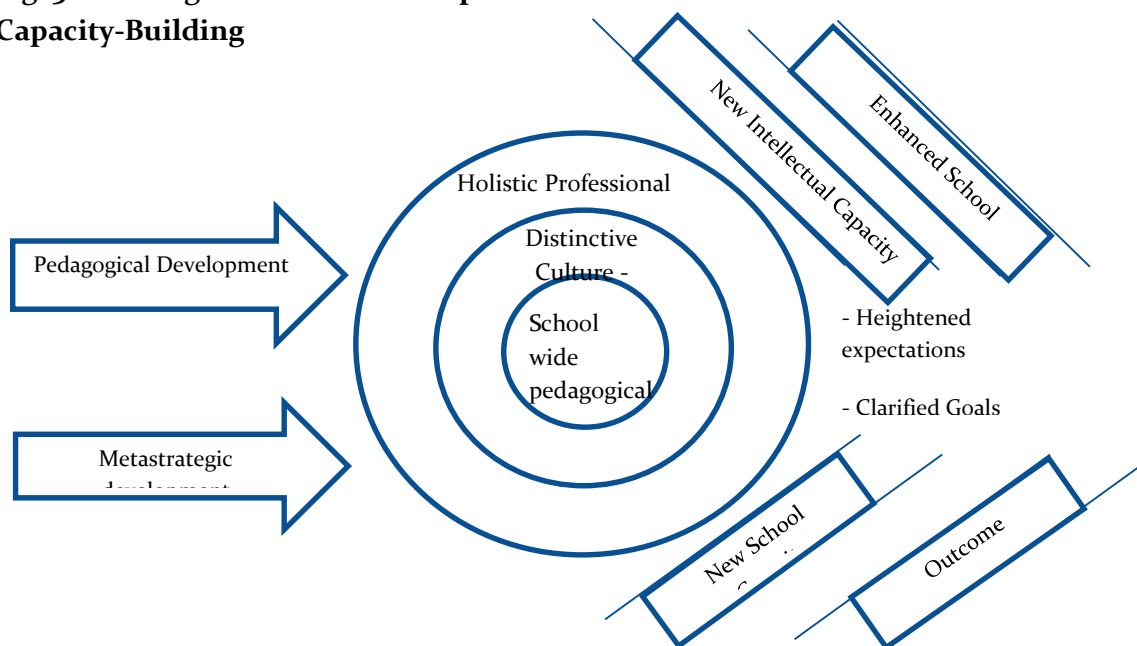
3. Application of Conceptualization of 'Leadership for Successful School Reform'

According to Harris, & Johnston, (2010) in the article "Values-Based Leadership: At the Heart of Sustaining School Reform and Improvement" the most critical challenge that educational leaders nowadays have to face is that of promoting specific innovative or new reform-leading changes in an organization. Anything that leads to or generates 'systemic' improvements in terms of student achievement and the enhancement of school culture entails significant changes in the organization which the school administrators will most likely resist. This is quite true in the experiences of the researcher of this paper as in the organization where he belongs, the ultimate challenge for him is how to exercise his own leadership function and role as a teacher while at the same time facilitating or contributing to the betterment of the school through a successful reform.

Incidentally, there has been a concern over the concept of "capacity-building" in education which was used to demonstrate a logical link between the concepts of knowledge society and organisational development. Under the concept of "capacity-building", two premises were identified which were first: "the notion of professional learning community must be accepted as integral to organisational development" and secondly, "that professional learning communities, once established, must accept that their core purpose involves the creation and sustainability of significant 'new knowledge'". Out of the concept of capacity-building in education came the six key milestones which were considered the sequence of development in education that transpired within the past decade (Crowther, 2010).

However, what may be considered as the most important result of such immense progress of the creation of the three concepts knowledge creation and shaping, leadership, and capacity-generation are the four insights which came about and played critical roles in the recognition of leadership in the improvement or reformation of schools which are summed up in the figure below (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009):

Fig. 3.1 Linking Parallel Leadership and Successful Capacity-Building



The first critical element in the linkage of parallel leadership and successful capacity-generation is the establishment of the direct relationship between leadership as a distributed quality and successful school improvement method. In this diagram, the concept of “principal as a leader” is no longer being regarded as adequate and suited for organizational learning, sustainability and knowledge creation (Crowther, 2010). In support to this, Raelin, (2005, p 4.) also states that in order to facilitate a successful school reform, there is a need to apply the concepts of “leaderful organizations” and “team leadership which acknowledges distributed leadership or the teachers themselves being considered as leaders. Apparently there have been many evidence which proves that distributed leadership and acknowledgment that teachers are also leaders indeed contribute to school effectiveness as these characteristics help develop learning communities (Harris, 2004; Dorothy, & Crowther, 2002).

In the college where the researcher is now teaching, the ultimate dilemma lies at the fact that the organization still does not accept the concept of “leaderful organizations” or leadership among teachers. Based on experience, the concept of leadership in the college is still based on the traditional concept that the true leaders in the organization are those in position and that the teachers or faculty members may or may not possess this kind of leadership power because not all of them are assigned specific posts in the organization that give them a title. Personally, the researcher thinks and strongly believes that in order for the college to become more effective, it must be able to successfully exercise linking parallel leadership.

Based on the given figure by Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, (2009), the pedagogical development and the meta-strategic development both advocate strongly the fact that “teachers must be leaders” and the “principal must be leaders”. However, the truth is that in most schools, there is a superimposed customary separation between teacher development and principal development which also hinders the proper alignment of the school or university’s entire vision

as well as the school's wide approaches to teaching, assessment and learning (p. 60-61) .The researcher thinks that somehow this also applies to the case of the college where he is teaching simply because the college is not currently aware of the different means to develop professional learning opportunities which foster school-wide pedagogical approaches. The strategies and approaches to professional development between the college principal and the teachers are currently separated.

At present, the teachers in the college follow different strategies which they made and initiated on their own. The teachers do not pursue a clear shared purpose for all the students' learning which was a result of the lack of acknowledgment of the college administration on their leadership capacities including the need for them to be trained according to or in line with the overall learning vision of the entire organization (Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2009). Also, at the moment there is very little teacher collaboration initiatives to achieve the purpose because first of all, not all teachers are aware of the purpose or vision of the organization which directly hinder them from collaborating with one another effectively (Sergiovanni, 2005). Lastly, the teachers in the college, at least majority of them, do not take collective responsibility for student learning (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009, p.61).

Clearly, given all these present characteristics of the teachers in the Malaysian college where the researcher is currently teaching, there is an evident lack of the exercise of parallel leadership and holistic learning that bring together all the teachers, school administrators and support staff in the aim of providing shared professional learning. For this reason, the researcher suggests the need for the parallel leaders to understand the value and significance of parallel leadership and how it brings about one powerful effect which sustains the focus and momentum of the staff while providing new and better opportunities for the staff in any innovative effort to promote literacy cycle innovation (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009, p.61).

As stated by Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, (2009), the main requirement dimensions and characteristics that must be present to facilitate a successful professional learning community and university are the following: 1.) Shared vision and values, 2.) Collective application and learning, 3.) Shared and supportive leadership, 4.) Conditions that are supportive, 5.) Personal practices that are shared, and 6.) High-level of focus on student learning. In the absence of these dimensions professional learning may not possibly exist and effective leadership may not be implemented as well. This simply implies therefore that a pre-requisite of effective leadership is successful professional learning that in the absence of professional learning, the existence of great leaders may not exist. As indicated in the text: "The most notable trait of great leaders, more specifically the great change leaders, is their quest for learning. Such leaders show an exceptional willingness to push themselves out of their comfort zones, even after they have achieved a great deal." (Crowther, et al, 2009, p. 61).

The kind of leadership that is required in the context of college learning is one that not only promotes but directly encourages the participation of leaders in both formal and informal professional learning. Unfortunately in the college where the researcher is presently teaching, it has not yet come to that point because of the traditional mindset of the school administration and its deformed view of leadership and somewhat lacking view of the importance of learning in the context of the school staff, teachers and even principal. The researcher therefore deems that it is very critical that the school administration gain a deeper understanding of parallel leadership and leadership learning as well (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009, p.61).

Aside from holistic professional learning, another important dimension that is necessary for parallel leadership is distinctive culture-building. According to Crowther, et al (2009), culture establishment and building is very essential to achieve school-based leadership because culture is an important dimension of shared leadership responsibility. Apparently, the integration of the different assumptions, artifacts and values within the college/university are closely linked to the success of parallel leadership and these three dimensions' capacity to link school vision with the teacher's work. In addition to this, parallel leaders are considered as "culture-builders" as they believe that their efforts will automatically result to some form of achievement of specific goals. As such, the expectancy levels of teachers may further be heightened and enhanced through very specific actions such as helpful feedback, meaningful rewards, professional community and consideration of school level (p, 61).

In the college where the researcher teaches, teachers are not considered as culture builders but mainly as influencers of the pre-existing culture which has long existed in the college ever since it was established. The fact is that in the college, teachers are treated mainly as responders and not initiators which somehow negatively affect their expectancy levels and their specific actions directed towards the achievement of a better goal for the organization. When this happens, parallel leadership is also hindered and effective leadership becomes elusive as in the case of the college where the researcher is teaching. Since critical to the success of parallel leadership is the teachers' roles on culture building, the failure of an organization to highlight this particular role of teachers may result to an unsuccessful exercise of parallel leadership.

Moreover, teachers are considered as culture capital simply because they have the capacity to link the cultural differences that exist among the different young people. There is no other school staff other than the teachers which have the capacity to address cultural barriers to support the well-being of students. For this reason, the teachers are indeed excellent representatives of the school that possess the right to establish a distinctive culture-building. Furthermore, there is no doubt that culture building cannot simply be separated from the moral dimension of leadership (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009, p.63).

Finally, there is the schoolwide pedagogical development which is the third aspect of the three intersecting aspects that contribute a successful school-building capacity. This particular aspect emphasizes the importance of a kind of teaching that requires students to think as well as to develop in-depth understanding and apply academic learning to realistically important problems. As for the importance of schoolwide pedagogy and collective responsibility, it was mentioned by Crowther, et al (2009) that learner-directed learning does not simply work and that various individual pedagogical preferences are always more effective.

As is also mentioned, most of the school wide pedagogical approaches in the past provide wide approaches to learning which serves as an advantage to the learner because these tie in the most successful teaching practices of themselves and their colleagues in line with the school's vision and values. Ideally, effective school wide pedagogical approaches are those that are co-developed and provide for the basis of teachers to reinforce one another's proven practices as well as create heightened consistency on their learning experiences as students specifically those that experience difficulties. However, such pedagogical approaches may further be refined through professional dialogue with the colleagues (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009).

In the college where the researcher of this study teaches, several school wide pedagogical approaches are being used and the researcher thinks that this was one of the best strengths of the college because when it comes to pedagogy, the college has a distinctive vision of “excellence in all aspects of learning”. However, what blocks the existence of an effective school building capacity at least in the case of the Malaysian college where the researcher is teaching is the fact that the school has yet to perfect the involvement and collaboration of teachers with the principals as well as other school staffs. Shared responsibility is still seriously lacking which negatively affect the quality of the school’s teaching, learning and assessment practices. Also, due to the absence of parallel leadership, the school-building capacity of the college remains to be unmaximized and within some of its aspects, untapped.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the very concept of teacher leadership has already existed for many decades now yet there still appears to be some confusion with regard to how this concept is viewed in today’s generation of colleges and universities. The sad fact is that to many, the concept of teacher leadership is still being equated to the act of accepting traditional positions in the schools wherein they serve as those school staff placed in a higher level position such as grade and team leaders, curriculum committee chairs, department chairs principal and many others. What remains unknown to them is the fact that the concept of teacher leadership in today’s new concept is now being closely linked to leadership for successful school reform and the increase in a school-building capacity of various educational institutions.

Apparently, the kind of leadership that is most importantly needed to be applied nowadays in the context of college learning is one that not only promotes but directly encourages the participation of leaders in both formal and informal professional learning. The critical ingredient or aspect of this kind of leadership is “parallel leadership” or a collaborative form of leadership wherein the school staff, teachers and even the principal possess a shared leadership responsibility and professional learning concept that are directed on the well-being of their students. However the reality is that in most colleges and universities nowadays, there is still a prevailing lack of deeper understanding on parallel leadership and leadership learning which seriously needs to be addressed.

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