Leadership Characteristics of An Excellent Principal in Malaysia

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Abstract

Excellent principals are sense makers of schools that help create a sustainable school climate that will enhance students' and teachers' productivity. Hence they are not only the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) but also the instructional leaders and motivators for their teams. In exploring the leadership characteristics of an excellent school principal in Malaysia, findings indicated that the principal demonstrated characteristics outlined by literature and used a variety of educational strategies and situational leadership styles. Nevertheless some felt that the principal was too ambitious, result oriented, and had little time for teachers and students.

Keywords: Excellent principal, Secondary schools, Leadership style, Teachers, Students

1. Introduction

Effective leadership is widely accepted as being a key constituent in achieving school improvement. A highly effective principal is not called to the job per se, but more importantly to the opportunity to make a difference in the school. This could mean a change in the educational landscape, heal an ailing school, or work for the concepts of greater accountability, equity and excellence.

Research findings from diverse countries and different school contexts have revealed the powerful impact of leadership in securing school development and change (e.g., Hopkins 2001a; West, Jackson, Harris and Hopkins, 2000). Hopkins (2001b) highlights the centrality of transformational and instructional leadership practices in achieving school improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances. Existing literature also indicates that the most popular theories are located in the transactional and transformational models identified more than 20 years ago (Burns, 1978; Hoy and Miskell, 2008) and lately reinvented through such terms as 'liberation' (Tampoe, 1998), 'educative' (Duignan and McPherson, 1992), 'invitational' (Stoll and Fink, 1996) and 'moral' leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992).

According to Brenninkmeyer and Spillane (2008: 436), past research paints a picture of a principal as someone who spends a lot of time solving instructional problems in the school, and whose performance in solving those problems has a tangible effect on the results of the students at the school. What is clear from these, and from literature of effective schools, is that, successful leaders not only set direction but they also model values and practices consistent with those of the school, so that "purposes which may have initially seemed to be separate become fused" (Sergiovanni, 1995: 119). Effective leaders are proactive and seek help that is needed. They also nurture an instructional program and school culture conducive to learning and professional growth. Nevertheless, effective instructional and administrative leadership is required to implement change processes (Hoy and Miskell, 2008).

However, today's school environments have become more complex and diverse where all children are expected to learn and where high learning standards set the vision of educational success for all students. In a rapidly changing and more technologically oriented society, students will need to acquire the knowledge and skills that will help them achieve success in school and in life. The evolving nature of school environments has placed high demands on educational leaders. Where knowledge of school management, finance, legal issues and state mandates was once the primary focus for the preparation of school leaders, education reform has created an urgent need for a strong emphasis on development

of instructional leadership skills to promote effective teaching and high level learning. Moreover, educational leaders must recognize and assume a shared responsibility not only for students' intellectual and educational development, but also for their personal, social, emotional, and physical development. The increasing diversity of school communities places a premium on school leaders who can create a vision of success for all students, and use their skills in communication, collaboration and community building to ensure that the vision becomes a reality.

2. Background of the study

Malaysia is a fast developing country with a mission to become a regional hub for educational excellence in South East Asia. In fulfilling such a noble quest, all learning organizations in Malaysia face increasingly critical demands for greater equity and accountability. Henceforth, school heads who are seen as 'sense makers' and 'agents of change' are challenged to turn around ailing schools and improve everyday teaching and learning that meet international global standards. Societal demands for greater efficiency and accountability have also seen school heads beginning to display excellence in both the management and daily administration of schools. In a move to produce excellent schools, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) gives both state and national level awards to schools in a number of categories. These include awards such as The Potential School Award, The '3K'/Three Excellent Aspects Award (given to school, which display clean, safe and conducive learning environment) and the Minister of Education Quality Award.

Alongside with these awards, the MOE realizes that award-winning schools are a result of performing and excellent school principals. Therefore the Malaysian MOE has taken steps to reward these principals by adding greater promotional posts for school heads. Beginning 1998, secondary school principals who display excellent leadership qualities can be promoted to become Excellent Principals. Later in 2005, these excellent principals were given another chance to move to a higher rung on the remuneration ladder by being awarded the designation of a Super Principal.

Potential candidates for these two posts have to undergo and fulfill a set of stringent criteria. It includes school observations by representatives from various MOE divisions such as the Federal School Inspectorate Division, the Schools Division and the National Institute of Educational Management and Leadership. Besides observations, interviews are also carried out with all the stakeholders in the school, i.e. the teachers, the students, parents and representatives from the community. The final phase of the selection is based on an interview with the school principal by a selected panel of officers from MOE chaired by the Director General of Education of Malaysia. Once selected, the principal is said to possess distinct abilities in educational leadership, educational management and parent or community relations. The selection criteria usually takes into account the ability of the leader to accomplish the school's vision and mission. It also includes aspects such as teaching and learning excellence, academic achievement, co-curricular performance, interpersonal relationships and the documentation of the school's activities.

By the year 1998, a total of 23 secondary school principals in Malaysia had been awarded the designation of excellent principals. In 2004, another 20 secondary school principals were awarded the designation of excellent principals. In 2009, the number of excellent principals has accelerated to 162 out of roughly 2200 secondary principals in Malaysia as stated in the *Majlis Pengetua Kebangsaan Kebangsaan*/National Excellent Principal Council (2009)'s website (http://mpkk.org/). Henceforth, it was felt a study should be conducted to examine and document the characteristics of an excellent principal in Malaysia so that others could benchmark some of the practices in improving their own leadership characteristics.

3. Research design

This study used a qualitative case study method to collect and analyze the research data. Stake (1997), and Creswell and Clark (2007) noted that even though case studies have not found the solutions for education problems, researchers and others have appreciated their deep, self-referential probes of problems. In-depth portraits of a small number of individual principals would however, provide a fuller access to their views across a range of issues (Gronn and Ribbins, 1996; Fraenkel and Wallen, 2006). In this study, data were gathered to learn as much as possible about the contextual variables that might have a bearing on the case. After that, the data obtained from this qualitative case was analyzed.

This paper presented only leadership characteristics of an excellent principal as part of the findings conducted in the Syed Ali Secondary School (not the real name), an exemplary school located in the state of Seremban in Malaysia. The selection was based on the number of awards it had received. According to the records obtained from the State Inspectorate Division, the principal in this study had displayed an "outstanding" effort in creating and supporting a positive teaching-learning climate in the school. The records also revealed that the principal had done a lot to improve instructional practices in the school.

The target population of this study consisted of the 87 teachers and 1105 students in the selected school. To explore leadership approaches in this school, a research design was constructed that incorporated multiple methods. The data of this qualitative study was collected through extensive interviews, casual conversations, formal and informal observations, and various kinds of school and policy documents.

A total of eleven semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted for the purpose of this study. The interviews were bilingual in nature, conducted in both the Malay Language and in English depending on the interviewees' ease and comfort with a particular language. All the eleven formal interviews were audio tape-recorded, while a few informal conversations with both teachers and students were recorded in the researchers' personal notebooks during and after the conversations.

Since the principal was the main focus of this study, three interviews were conducted with the principal, three interviews with senior assistants (one interview each), three interviews with teachers, three interviews with students and one with the Chairperson of the Parent-Teacher Association. This study was guided by the following research questions that shed some light to help structure interview questions for the principals, teachers and students.

- What is the vision and mission of the school?

- What are the principal's leadership strategies?

- What are the leadership styles practiced by the school principal?

- What are the excellent personal attributes demonstrated by the principal?

- What are the administrative roles played by the principal?

- What are the limitations of the principal?

In addition to these broad questions, the researchers also included other related questions, which were deemed relevant to the research topic. In addition to conducting interviews, a number of other activities were also conducted during the 14 days of this research in the school. The researchers also took the opportunity to attend a number of meetings and special events such as management meetings, staff meetings, subject panel meetings and the Parent-Teacher Conference at the school. Besides that, the researchers also conducted a number of observations such as student activities in the afternoon and classroom observations of the teaching and learning process. Non-formal observations included observation of teachers in the staff room, observation of teachers and students at the cafeteria, and general observations of the school building, school library, and special rooms such as the science laboratory, teaching aids room, and the school Conference Room. These observations were carried out to get a complete picture of the school's physical as well as cultural set-up.

In addition to conducting interviews and observations at the school, the researchers also looked into a number of relevant school documents. It included annual school magazines, special reports on school profiles, reports on school activities and strategic planning, minutes of the various subject panel meetings and staff meetings, school examination results and analysis, some background information on the students attending the school, history of the school, and the principal's biographical information, work experience, academic and professional backgrounds, principal's duties at the school, and a diary of her work showing her activities for any two weeks at the school.

4. Findings

Within a study comprising of only one school, one principal, three senior assistants, 87 teachers and 1105 students, the possibilities for generalization are inevitably limited. Since one of the aims of the study was to explore the leadership characteristics and how far the school head shared her school vision with her colleagues and students, the volume and range of data collected in this study may provide a basis for some preliminary findings about leadership in secondary schools in Malaysia.

4.1 The principal

The school principal in this study is referred to as Aminah (not her real name). She is a 53-year old lady who holds a Bachelor of Education in Islamic Studies. Aminah has 18 years of experience in teaching secondary schools and has been in different managerial positions for the past 10 years. She was a Head of Department for 5 years and had the experience of being a Deputy Principal for five years in two schools prior to her appointment as the principal at Syed Ali Secondary School in 2000. This was her first appointment as a school principal.

Prior to her appointment in 2000, the Syed Ali Secondary School staff members were divided into two camps. One camp was with the principal while a rival camp consisted of staff members who were with the deputy principal. The staff morale was low as the previous principal believed in a 'divide and rule' policy.

During her tenureship, Aminah was able to turn around this ailing school and unite the teachers into working collaboratively towards a shared vision and mission. More importantly, the dynamic leadership qualities portrayed by Aminah saw the school pushing forward to win a number of coveted awards in the educational arena in Malaysia. Within one year of her principalship, in 2001, the school won the National Level 3K Award (best school in terms of creating a clean, safe and conducive learning environment). Later in 2002, the school won the State Potential School Award and in 2003, it won the prestigious National Minister of Education Quality Award.

4.2 Aminah's vision, mission and leadership strategies

Interviews carried out with Aminah revealed that she had a number of strategies that helped her turn around an ailing and divided school. She stressed that her first strategy was to bridge the gap between the two camps. Therefore during her 'walkabouts' around the school, she would talk and carry out informal interviews with both teachers and students and get to know what they wanted their school teaching and learning environment to be. Based on the information she had collected, she gathered her top management and did her strategic planning and set in motion her plans for the school.

Her second strategy was to set up management teams that involved all teachers in the school. In developing both macro and micro management teams, she stressed that she took deliberate steps to involve members from both parties and this gave them the chance to know each other and work collaboratively. More importantly, she revealed that she 'participated as a team member and not the boss when decisions were to be made'. Besides that, she set up micro student management teams to help each staff committee so that they will have some help to execute plans that they would like to carry out in the school. She highlighted she set up a school beautification team that consisted of both teachers and students.

Once the macro and micro teams were beginning to take off, she took every opportunity she could to highlight what each team was doing at her weekly assembly or staff meetings. Aminah felt that this way "every team felt that whatever little contribution it was has been acknowledged by the school leader." She revealed that such positive reinforcement gave them the motivation to do better.

Once the teachers and students exhibited initial signs of closing the gap, Aminah moved on to her third strategy. She stressed that she whole-heartedly launched this strategy to ensure and inculcate a shared school vision and mission among all her school members. Going hand-in-hand with the vision and mission of the school was a need to "develop a certain school culture that would highlight moral values – the basic foundation to become a good human being."

Observations and interviews indicated that both teachers and students all communicated a shared vision and mission for the school. By 2004, Aminah was successful at realigning both staff and pupils to their particular vision of the school. The school's vision "*Menjana Generasi Cemerlang di Dunia, Sejahtera di Akhirat*" when translated means "To Create a Morally Upright Generation with Academic Excellence" and was well understood and implemented whole heartedly by all teachers and students in the school. This vision reminded them to pay due attention to both teaching and learning and more importantly, become morally upright citizens. Besides that, the school mission "to educate, to formulate and inculcate quality thinking in moral, academic and co-curriculum activities" was also reflected in most of their efforts to achieve excellent results in both academic and co-curricular activities.

The school management team (SMT) in the study 'walked the talk'; through the consistency and integrity of their actions, they modeled behavior that they considered desirable to achieve the school goals. They shared the belief and optimism that people have untapped potential for growth and development. The school management clearly respected others and modeled teacher leadership through empowering and encouraging others. They also trusted others and required trust from others. They recognized the need to be actively supportive, caring and encouraging, as well as challenging and confrontational when necessary.

A consistent and shared vision was an inherent part of their leadership approach. The school management team communicated their vision through relationships with staff and students and they built these around core values. The vision and practices of these heads were organized around personal values, such as the modeling and promotion of respect for individuals, fairness and equality, caring for the well-being and whole development of students and staff, integrity and honesty. It was evident that the teachers' values and visions were primarily dedicated to the welfare of staff and students, with the latter at the centre. These values underpinned their relationships with staff, students, and parents and guided their day-to-day actions.

Ever since Aminah was appointed principal, she disclosed she had secretly harboured her plan to push her school for the State Potential School Award (*Sekolah Harapan*). She explained that once she realized that the school was with her, she put forward her plans. She was glad all the staff was with her. Then, she put forward her next strategy, i.e. to improve the school physical and teaching and learning environment. She soon put her plan into action and as a learning leader, she set forth her ship for sail. She sent out teams including herself to benchmark excellent schools and learning programmes. She did not limit herself to visiting schools only in her area but set foot in schools in other states.

Bringing back best practices from other schools and her strong belief in continual improvement, Aminah and her team set into motion their plans to improve the school environment. All teachers and all student societies in the school were involved in this school project. Within one year, the school was not only able to win the State 3K/Three Excellent Aspects Award but also the National '3K' Award (*Kebersihan, Keselamatan and Keceriaan)* for best school in terms of cleanliness, safety and creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning. From then she explained there was no holding back. This is what she had to say:

Once my school received the 3K Award I was pleasantly surprised. I had no one but to thank my teachers and students. . . . and also the State Education Department who believed in me and gave me the financial assistance I so desperately needed to run my programmes. . . It was at this point that I realized that I had been able to get my team together and I could do more. . From there we managed to go on to win the State Potential School Award and the most prestigious National Level - Minister of Education Quality Award in 2003. I strongly believe in my team now and as long as I give them some direction I know they are most capable to producing tangible results. All this is possible because I think we have a shared vision and mission to give the best to our students . . ."

4.3 Aminah's leadership styles

In her interview Aminah consistently highlighted the importance of possessing a wide range of leadership styles she used to address the diverse sets of issues and challenges she faced. She also highlighted the contingent nature of many of the decisions she had to make and how different leadership styles and strategies were used by her in different contexts.

4.3.1 Instructional leadership

Aminah stressed that she is first and foremost a teacher. She stands very strongly on the fact that as a school principal her first and foremost commitment is to teaching and learning. She emphasized that "all school principals must be good instructional leaders." As an academic leader, she put into place strategies on helping her students at all levels. Aminah ensured that her school curriculum committee had strategies to help the weak, the average and the best students. Aminah emphasized that 'all students must be pushed to explore their true potential and this could sometimes mean challenging them to new heights".

From the Malaysian perspective, Syed Ali Secondary School was an average school academically. Prior to 2000, the students' pass rate for PMR (Penilaian Menengah Rendah) or Lower Certificate of Education stood as 80% whilst the SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) or Malaysian Certificate of Education (equivalent to O Levels) was 68%. By 2004, with Aminah at the helm for 4 years, the school's academic achievement had improved significantly. The PMR pass rate rose from 80% to 100 % and the high stakes SPM Examination pass rate increased from 68 % to 95%.

Aminah's teachers highlighted that their school improved academically under the current leadership because Aminah always involved everyone in decision-making with regard to curriculum implementation. According to her deputy, Aminah "listened to everyone and she displayed this professional trust in all her teachers". She gave them the help and advice they needed to implement their programmes. Aminah's deputy added that the school head not only chose "the right teacher to teach the right class" but also cultivated the habit of developing professional dialogue between teachers by encouraging the school teachers and the students to become inquiring communities.

According to Teacher 2 in the study, Aminah was a principal who placed a high premium upon her own professional development and the professional development of her staff. In this respect, the principal developed professional and intellectual capital in the school. The learning community enhanced not only students' academic achievement but also helped developed her teachers. Recent work by Barber and Mourshed (2007, 13) argues that three things matter most in terms of the top performing school system were identical in this study:

- Getting the right people to become teachers;

- Developing them into effective instructors;

- Ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

The first is essentially about making entry teacher training highly selective to ensure that the highest caliber trainees become teachers. This initiative has become a main focus of the Ministry of Education in teacher training. The second involves classroom coaching, enabling teachers to learn from one another and having leaders who provide these interventions. Such instructional leadership rests on head-teachers focusing their time on the quality of teaching. The third involves monitoring and reviewing what is happening in a school, and intervening when necessary. Leaders need to know what the assessment and student learning data show and act upon them. These findings add further weight to those who have advocated instructional leadership (Hill, 2001) and to research which demonstrates the values of learning-centred leadership (NCSL, 2004; Southworth, 2004). Interviews with the teachers further revealed that the teachers in the school were committed to the belief that every child can learn and succeed. The principal made decisions that motivated both staff and students and placed an emphasis upon student's achievement and learning. The teachers in the study talked about 'creating the conditions that would lead to higher student performance' and they were deeply concerned about the welfare and the educational experiences of their students.

4.3.2 Situational leadership

Aminah pointed out that she adopted a more autocratic leadership style during the initial stage of the school improvement project before they won the Best Quality Award from the Minister of Education, Malaysia in 2003. She felt she needed to manage a divided staff and at the same time needed to get things done. Nevertheless, she

emphasized that she always listened to her people first before she made any changes. Once she had made a decision based on consensus, she ensured that everyone toed the line.

Later when the school was been observed for a variety of awards especially during the inspection stage from the School Inspectorate, School Division, and the Chief Director General's Office, the principal adopted a more supportive leadership style in order to assist staff through the process. The school management team also took this role very seriously and consciously demonstrated high levels of emotional responsibility towards their staff during the inspection period. An important contributory factor to achieving a positive outcome was considered to be how the principal's leadership style matched the situation or circumstance facing the school at different times. In particular, the principal in this study emphasized that while she had a broad set of values she adhered to, she did not consider this to be a fixed leadership approach. She felt strongly that she could switch to a leadership style that suited the situation, and could behave in ways that did not reflect her core beliefs, if necessary.

4.3.3 Distributing leadership

Aminah highlighted in her interviews that student and teacher outcomes will improve when they are empowered to make decisions in their particular areas of interest or importance to them. According to Aminah, "when teachers are empowered, they feel good and usually do their best to prove that they can do the job well" Aminah stressed that by building macro and micro management teams, she gave her teachers and students the opportunity to lead, to innovate, develop and learn together. She added that she always told her teams this, "If the school is to improve only you can do it no one else. So do your best and you will see the difference."

Aminah adopted highly creative approaches to tackling the complex demands of implementing multiple changes. The decision to work with, and through, teams, as well as individuals, was a common response to the management of change. The principal used a number of strategies to bring out the best in her staff. In addition to formal development opportunities, these strategies included: the power of praise; immediate and positive reinforcement, involving others in decision-making and giving professional autonomy. Although Aminah concentrated on the teaching staff in the first instance, she also used similar approaches when dealing with support staff, parents and, to some extent, students. The following are some excerpts from interviews that indicate her distributing leadership style:

'When I first stepped into this school it was very hierarchical in nature. Most of the decisions were made by top management. The middle and low managers were not involved in any decision making activities. Since I took over I have made it a point to stress that every individual is a member of the team and in the team each and everyone has to be committed and should share the responsibility not only to follow but more importantly contribute by giving input for decision making' (Aminah-The principal).

'My current principal has given responsibility to each and everyone individual in the school. For her it is not just a case of delegating tasks but shared responsibility.' (Teacher 1)

Aminah reiterated that in her four years as head, she found that different leadership strategies would be used in different contexts but she held her central belief in distributing leadership to teachers remained unaltered. This form of leadership she added "starts, not from the basis of power and control, but from the ability to act with others and to enable others to act." For her, distributing leadership places an emphasis upon allowing and empowering those who are not in positions or responsibility or authority to lead. In general, the principal's distribution of leadership tasks seemed primarily aimed at staff commitment by supporting staff initiatives and a climate where it is alright to take risks. This is underlined by her explicit wish that the school has a vision that is agreed by all. The result supported the principals' study in Tasmania and Victoria in Australia by Moos, Krejsler and Kofod (2008).

4.3.4 Invitational leadership

Stoll and Fink (1996) describe 'invitational leadership' as a form of leadership where leaders place a high premium upon personal values and inter-relationships with others. Aminah is clearly a leader that reflects many of the dimensions of invitational leadership. She placed an emphasis upon people rather than systems and invited others to lead. One concrete example was her push to enhance teaching and learning. She encouraged her teachers to conduct action research. Teachers who had successfully completed their research were invited to present their findings to both teachers and students alike. This motivated everyone to be actively involved in research and this indirectly developed a culture to enhance teaching and learning at the school. It was also clear that, while the principal possessed a range of leadership strategies to address the diverse sets of issues and problems she faced, at the core of her leadership practice was a belief in empowering others.

'For me as a principal it is my duty to facilitate and give others the confidence to grow and to take on new responsibilities. For my staff to do this I must be able to share the power and not keep it at the top for myself alone.' (The Principal)

'With this principal everyone can see that there is power sharing. We are all involved in decision making and everyone's ideas are taken into consideration before a final decision is made. We like that. It is more democratic.' (Teacher 12)

4.3.5 People-centred leadership

According to the teachers interviewed, the principal was a person who displayed people-centered leadership in her day-to-day dealings with individuals. A majority (87%) of the teachers interviewed felt that her behavior and interaction with others was premised upon respect and trust and her belief in all her people. The teachers highlighted that Aminah had a strong belief in developing the potential of both her staff and her students.

A principle concern for Aminah was maintaining staff morale and motivation. To motivate her staff, she took pains in ensuring little things were not forgotten. She took the trouble to send greetings such as birthday wishes, get well soon cards and wishes on the success achieved by her colleagues and their families. These simple gestures touched the very core of human relations and made her a leader that had her staff's respect. Even though she was generous with her praises and motivation, she did not stop short to point out things that were not right.

Aminah's emphasis on continuing development of her staff reflected her recognition that teachers were her most important resource. Consequently, she was highly skilled at using a combination of pressure and support to promote the efforts of teachers, particularly when working with the most difficult students. She encouraged teachers to take risks and rewarded innovative thinking.

This was echoed by Aminah when she said that "*people are your greatest asset and I firmly believe therefore that the staff and the students in this school are my best resource for change.*' It was also very obvious that the human qualities she possessed enabled her to lead others effectively and to establish confidence in others that their vision was worth sharing.

4.4 Aminah's personal attributes

If Aminah was able to bring her divided staff to work collaboratively it was due to her personal attributes. Teachers and students who were interviewed all pointed out that she was a person who held fast to high morals and values.

According to her deputy (Senior Assisstant 1), Aminah being an Islamic religious teacher possessed attributes of a good Muslim. She was dominant and confident yet possessed the humility that a leader should have. She was humble and mixed well with her peers. She never let rank separate her from her teachers and was a true and loyal friend when you needed one. Her teachers added that Aminah was a determined person and a principle-oriented lady. She worked hard and believed in what she was doing. In the long run, her persistence and perseverance often led her to obtain what she aimed for.

Aminah was, to both her teachers and students, a warm and caring person. She was also polite, friendly and kind hearted. To many, she was soft spoken and this most probably enabled her to maintain a cool and calm disposition at all times. One of her deputy (Senior Assistant II) had this to say:

"*She is soft spoken yet firm. Normally her kind nature just melts people. For example if you go in angry and frustrated, you would come out feeling good. That's Aminah for you. . . . She will let you talk . . . When you have finished talking only then she would respond and most of the time, the advice she gives is so simple yet leaves one fulfilled.*"

'It is important that staff and students are involved in the life of the school and relate to each other in a positive way.' (The Principal)

'The head has ensured that we work more in teams and work across our subject areas. This has made us build broader relationships and work together.' (Subject Head 8)

The Head of Language Department felt that Aminah was a creative leader. To her, Aminah reflected a person "who could be dominant, steadfast and cautious at the same time." Though she was soft spoken, her staff saw her as a motivator who always brought out the best in her teachers and students. When examinations were round the corner, she would make time to go on her rounds to motivate her students to do their best.

According to her teachers, her greatest asset was her good communication skills. She was to many a good listener and her confidence in speaking ensured she was able to get her message across to her people clearly. According to her staff and students, her common inspiring words include "okay, no problem, well-done, excellent, congratulations, let's do it together, we could do it, and thank you".

Aminah was also a leader who was willing to learn. She was always passionate about learning and Teacher 32 said that Aminah always 'wanted to be in touch with the latest developments. She was willing to learn from her peers and this made her human and a friend to all of us. According to Teacher 23, Aminah possessed great enthusiasm in whatever she did. In her words, "seeing this enthusiasm in her, we too were motivated to be like her. It was moments like this we felt

inspired to work with her." Such words also reveal the charismatic qualities that Aminah possessed. All these personal attributes most probably enabled her to win the hearts of her team.

The principal was also seen as a fair person with genuine joy and vibrancy when talking to teachers and students. Aminah generated a high level of commitment in others, through her openness, honesty and good inter-personal relationships. According to Aminah, she placed emphasis upon generating positive relationships with teachers, parents and students and fostering a view of the school as being part of, rather than apart from the community.

4.5 Aminah's administrative roles

Finally, Aminah was asked to outline some of her main leadership roles. As the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the school, she felt she could not run away from being an administrator and manager of her school. She highlighted that as an administrator, she had three capable deputies. Senior Assistant I helped her with the school Academic Affairs while Senior Assistant II looked into the student affairs. Senior Assistant III helped her with co-curriculum activities.

Aminah felt that besides being a school manager, she was also the school's Public Relations Officer. She felt her job was made easier because of the good and friendly relationship that she had with the school Parent-Teacher Association members and the District and State Ministry of Education Officers. Most of the teachers also felt that Aminah was "good at developing and maintaining relationships". According to her deputy (Senior Assistant I) the school was never short of teachers. Any teacher who left either due to a transfer in posting or was on maternity leave was quickly replaced by a substitute teacher. Aminah was able to get quick replacements primarily because of her good working relationship with the ministry.

Aminah highlighted the fact that one of her major role was being an instructional leader. She emphasized that as a principal she demanded high standards for teaching and teacher performance. Observations, document analysis and interviews revealed that time was provided to ensure that teachers met on a regular basis to discuss teaching and learning in their various panel meetings. She also made time to monitor classroom teaching and learning and ensured individual assessments were carried out. Poor teaching was not ignored or tolerated within the school. When it did exist, Aminah ensured the top management team together with the relevant panel heads looked into possibilities of providing help and guidance. In a few cases identified in the school, a combination of structured support, monitoring and an individual development program addressed the problem of poor quality teaching. For Aminah, "effective leadership was about capacity building in others and investing in the social capital of the school."

Another role that Aminah saw herself in was that of a motivator. To her, a principle concern was maintaining staff morale and motivation. The emphasis placed on continuing development of her staff reflected the recognition that she had on teachers as her most important resource. Consequently, she encouraged teachers to take risks and rewarded innovative thinking. In doing all this she felt she needed to provide inspiration and motivation so that everyone would be willing to give their best to the school.

4.6 Aminah's limitations

In this study Aminah displayed a number of characteristics that have been outlined by literature. Nevertheless, being human she was not without her limitations. Approximately 10% of the teachers voiced these limitations. In moving forward to giving her best and in getting the team of teachers and students to work alongside her, she was according to one teacher "a person who is too result-oriented that she has little time to stop and smell the flowers. Therefore she has little time to interact with both teachers and students*."*

Similar sentiments were also shared by a group of students who felt that they did not really know their principal as 'she hardly talked to the students." They admitted she talked to prefects and school captains and class monitors but lacked the personal touch with the average school student.

Teacher 12 felt she was 'too ambitious' whilst Teacher 34 stressed that "a teacher can only do so much - she wants us to do so much in so short a time." Others felt that her expectations were too high as she moved to strive for the best. The teachers acknowledged that they shared her passion but emphasized that they could not cope with her 'ever-increasing demands.' Teachers also pointed out that they were already burdened with a heavy teaching load and other academic duties and co-curricular activities. All these resulted in some teachers experiencing a high level of job stress and low job satisfaction.

Since she was handling a big school, the workload was high and some teachers like Teacher 56 felt her 'demands and pressure for tangible results from everyone were a bit too unrealistic". In such a scenario not every teacher is with her in spirit but they admitted that they felt that as a team, they had to work collaboratively with the school head. Some students felt that the school conducted 'too many activities', they felt 'tired' and would just like to have 'some free days with nothing to do.'

Despite these limitations, the disgruntled students and teachers all admitted that she was a good principal with good intentions who worked 'heart and soul' for the betterment of the school.

5. Implications and recommendations

The research findings of this study reveal the characteristics of a successful leader and the intensity and complexity of the role of a school principal.   The successful leader in this study was identified as being reflective, caring and a highly principled person who emphasized the human dimension of the management enterprise. She placed a high premium upon personal values and was concerned more with cultural as well as structural change. At certain circumstances, she had moved beyond a narrow rational, managerial view of her role to a more holistic, values-led approach guided by personal experience and preference.

With regard specifically to the role of the head teacher, the national Standards for head teachers (DfES, 2004) identify core professional leadership and management practices in six key areas. These apply to all phases and types of schools and are in turn subdivided into the knowledge, professional qualities (skills, dispositions and personal capabilities) and actions needed to achieve them (DfES, 2004: 4).   These include shaping the future, leading learning and teaching, developing self and working with others, managing the organization, securing accountability and strengthening community. These criteria are similar to the important competencies identified to become an excellent principal in Malaysia, namely defining vision and mission, enhancing teaching and learning, creative problem solving, and effective communication and motivational skills (Chan, 2009).

In terms of the role changes which have occurred, it is possible to see similar changes among other school heads in Malaysia during their leadership.   Based on the findings in this case and the work at the PricewaterhouseCoopers' study (2007) of school leadership, three similar criteria namely shared leadership, increased staff involvement in administration, and new leadership models and structures have been identified.   Becoming a school head is never an easy task. According to Southworth (2008: 421), there is a wide range of challenges currently facing school heads and the management team which can be grouped into five interrelated issues:

- Ensuring that school leaders have the capacity to meet the radical mix of challenges they now face;

- Equipping established, new and aspiring school leaders with necessary leadership knowledge, skills and competencies;

- Spreading effective leadership more widely to reduce variations in performance;

- Ensuring schools have leadership structures that are appropriate and sustainable for their context;

- Strengthening governance and, where necessary, changing the structure of governance.

Hence, attempts to establish how common these leadership attributes are should be used for selection and promotion of Malaysian school heads by the Ministry of Education. The capacity issue reflected the mix of high levels of shared and distributed leadership, sharp accountabilities and radical changes in the way schools are now expected to interact with other services and their communities (Southworth, 2008: 422).   To ensure schools heads and their management team are as effective as possible for the challenges of today and tomorrow, we need to relook into the training at how in the near future these characteristics will be demonstrated by our school heads.

Nations across the world are extending their provision of training and development programs for effective school principals. In Malaysia, the National Institute of Educational Management and Leadership has taken a step forward to establish programs for aspiring and serving head teachers. The Institute's training programs such as the *School Leadership and Management Program* (SLMP), National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and School Leadership Assessment Program are all testimonies of the importance attached by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia to the training of effective principals. This commitment has been further underlined by the establishment of a High Standard of Quality Education (HSQE), pioneered by the School Inspectorate Division in Malaysia.   Since values are central to successful leadership, reflection upon these must be central to training.   Alongside this must also be a focus upon critical thinking, emotional and cognitive, and intrapersonal as well as interpersonal skills development. Recognition of the intimate link in successful leadership between the personal and the professional, between the development of the individual and the organization is paramount.

Finally, strategic planning, problem-solving and the management of competing forces must be key components of leadership training for school improvement if schools are to become the high-achieving learning communities espoused by government. Rational models which focus upon the development of behavioral skills and competencies are insufficient if the needs of those aspiring and experienced heads who wish to become and remain successful in the changing times of the 21st century are not to be met.

6. Conclusion

This study shed some light into the intensity and complexity of the leadership role in the school.   Findings indicated that the principal is indeed the 'sense maker' of a school and her leadership characteristics are critical factors that help create a sustainable school climate that will enhance both teacher and student productivity. The leadership characteristics indicated that the principal demonstrated most of the main characteristics of an excellent principal as

outlined by literature. She also demonstrated that a variety of leadership styles and characteristics have to be horned for successful leadership to take place. Coupled with a value-based leadership style, an authoritarian form of leadership may be particularly necessary in the early stages of enhancing the school performance. In such a high performing school context, immediate action is required and hence, leadership approaches are often very directive and task-focused at the initial stage. However, the evidence collected within the study suggests that the principal adopts leadership approaches that match the particular stage of a school's development. While the principal acknowledged that she had adopted autocratic leadership approaches at critical times, she also agreed that this leadership approach was least likely to lead to sustained school improvement.

Thus, in most of her leadership tenure, the principal in the study had deliberately chosen a form of leadership to move the school forward, which empowered others to lead and distributed leadership activity throughout the school. This 'teacher leadership' in many ways covers a similar terrain to transformational leadership, both its orientation and aspiration.

The particular emphasis given by the principal to distributing leadership and empowering others would suggest an approach to leadership that has collaborative, participative and moral rather than transformational principles at its core. The findings indicated that various forms of teacher leadership prevailed and that this directly influenced collective problem solving and decision-making. While the principal's responses to problems varied, depending on the circumstance or situation, her value position remained consistently one of empowering pupils, staff and parents. The findings from the research study suggest that leadership in Syed Ali Secondary School was defined by an individual value system that embraces equity, empowerment and a moral purpose.

The study revealed a complex but compelling picture of leadership in the school. It revealed that the success of a school needs the full participation and smart partnerships from all parties concerned. Besides that, strong support, clear vision and appropriate empowerment are also seen as critical and crucial factors that should go hand-in-hand with good leadership. It reflected a learning leader that practiced a form of leadership that is collaborative, cooperative, participative, democratic and centrally concerned with giving others the responsibility to lead.

(7,733 words)

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