

Best Practices of Collaborative Leadership among Instructional Leaders

Amalan Terbaik Bagi Kepimpinan Kolaboratif Dalam Kalangan Pemimpin Pengajaran

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Abstract

This research describes collaborative leadership practices among primary schools' instructional leaders in mathematics education in Malaysia. The rationale for this research is to understand how collaborative leadership is practiced, especially in mathematics education in primary schools. Results from TIMSS and PISA evaluations have shown a tremendous decline in the mathematics performance in Malaysia, which worries educators and policymakers. To improve mathematics performance, researchers conducted a qualitative case study on school improvement, primarily focusing on collaborative leadership. The conceptual framework was developed from the distributed leadership model by Spillane (2007) and collaborative leadership model by Rubin (2009). Three primary schools were selected; two are cluster schools and one is normal daily primary school. Data were collected using interview, observation and document analysis techniques. Ten participants were chosen from the three schools using a purposive sampling method to participate in the interview session. Observation was done using videotapes, and school documents such as meeting minutes, examination results, etc. were analyzed. Findings suggest empirical evidence of the informal practice of collaborative leadership in the selected schools. Furthermore, to improve school performance, school leaders do play important roles in their organization.

Keywords: Collaborative leadership, practice, mathematics education, instructional leader, school improvement

Introduction

Mathematics education has been one of the focused subjects in Malaysia. Several changes have been made to ensure the quality of mathematics education would be on par with other developed countries such as Singapore, the United States of America and Great Britain. In 2007, however, educators and policymakers were shocked to see a tremendous decline in the Trends International for Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS) results as compared to 2003; this phenomenon has shown a continuous decline for 2007 as well.

Changes should be made especially in the way school leaders lead their schools to improve school performance. A good school always will portray an effective school

leadership. As Harris (2005) stated, *'Schools and schools systems are changing: More schools are working together either in hard or soft federations, and new style of leadership is required.'* Carmichael, Collins, Emsell & Haydon (2011, p. 2) also suggested that *'Leadership is strategic, focus on vision, and involves a strong element of building trust and emotional engagement with "followers"'*.

Besides principals who are able to manage change in their schools effectively can be characterized as being transformative rather than transactional, invitational rather than autocratic and empowering rather than controlling (Harris, 2005).

Edwards and Smits (2008) agreed that school leadership style should be more participative and collaborative rather than using a rigid command leadership approach. This argument also was reckoned by Lambert (as cited in Edward and Smits, 2008) who added that principals are no longer working alone in their organization. This statement has been supported by Spillane (2001) and Harris (2005).

Jameela and Janaibee (2011) also found that principals encourage teachers to inculcate teamwork among them. They found that principals create good relationships with parents. This relationship will help schools to gain resources to develop a conducive learning community. Jameela and Janaibee (2011) also supported Lambert's view that school principals always get help from the Parent-Teacher Association and the school's alumni. Interesting, however, are results from research done by Azlin Mansor, Jamallulail, Mohd. Izham and Norhayati (2013) that showed a different finding between two variables, leadership and student performance.

All these arguments show the importance of developing collaborative leadership practices in school organizations. The power given to school leaders influences the shaping of schools strategy (Carmichael, Collins, Emsell & Haydon, 2011, p. 35). This arguably will determine the level of success in each participating school.

Problem Statement

Many schools in Malaysia are facing problems with mathematical performance. The Malaysia Ministry of Education (MOE) has made numerous improvements to help students uplift their interest in learning mathematics. Findings from research conducted by Omotoso (2012) stated that school leaders frequently integrated leadership practices into school activities to improve student learning in mathematics and reading. Omotoso (2012) also stressed that positive social change will create deeper understanding between students' performance and the school administrator's leadership practices.

Other than that, results for the TIMSS in 2003 show that mathematics achievement was below the international average, which gives Malaysia 508 points compared to 1999. This achievement, however, does not comply with the national examination results for Primary School Evaluation Test (UPSR) as shown in Table 1. Furthermore, TIMSS result indicates that Malaysian students are weak in the higher order thinking skills questions. However, at national level, students who get D and E are not more than 20% which shows a tremendous result.

Table 1

Results for Mathematics Achievement per the TIMSS and UPSR

Year	Average Grade (Declining)	Grade D (%)	Grade E (%)	Pass (%)	TIMSS	Average score (Declining)
2013	2.18	5.79%	5.75%	88.46	1999	519 point
2014	2.26	6.08%	7.595	86.33	2003	508 point
2015	2.23	5.77%	7.155	87.08	2007	474 point
2016	3.10	-	19.54%	80.46	2011 2015	440 point 465 point

Source : Selangor State Education Department (2016)

These results led researchers to the study the development process of collaborative leadership practices in order to enhance mathematics education in primary schools. Although the result has shown an inclination in 2015 (*Mullis, Martin, Foy & Hooper, 2016*), the average score is still below the international average score.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand collaborative leadership practices among the schools instructional leaders. To that end, we proposed the following research question:

What is the understanding of school instructional leaders toward collaborative leadership practices?

Conceptual Framework

The current study employs a conceptual framework from two distinguished leadership models: distributed leadership produced by Spillane (2007) and collaborative leadership by Rubin (2009). Four elements were adapted as the foundation of this study.

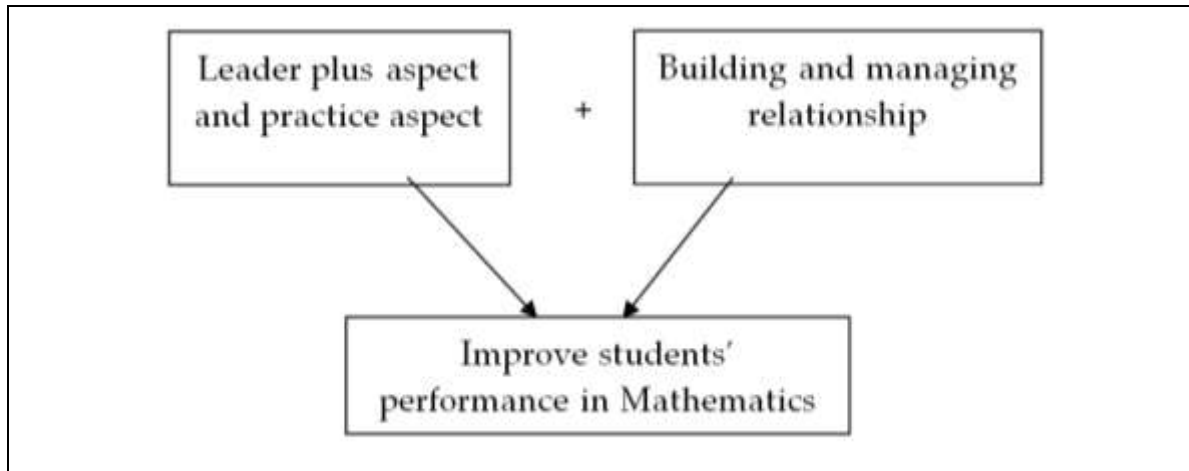


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Methodology

We conducted a multisite case study approach for this qualitative study. We selected three urban schools around Petaling Jaya in which two of the primary schools are cluster schools and one is a normal daily primary school. All of the schools comprised of three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian.

Data were collected using interviews; observations of the school premises, facilities and surroundings; and document analyses techniques. Observation data were captured using photographs, field notes and videotapes. The study used purposive sampling comprising the headmistress, senior assistant, head of the mathematics panel and a senior mathematics teacher. All participants were interviewed separately to ensure all data were valid and reliable. The researchers used open-ended interviews to give participants the opportunity to express their thoughts and views on collaborative leadership. Questions were asked based on the interviewee's role in the school. Data were triangulated using observation techniques and document analyses

The headmistresses were also given a self-assessment questionnaire to solicit initial information of their understanding on collaborative leadership skills. This self-assessment questionnaire was adapted from The Turning Point Collaborative Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaires. These questionnaires consist of six sections: (i) Assessing the Environment, (ii) Creating Clarity: Visioning and Mobilizing, (iii) Building

Trust, (iv) Sharing Power and Influence, (v) Developing People and (vi) Self-Reflection. All these six self-assessment questionnaires were aligned with Kouzes and Posner (2007) discovery on their transformational leadership practices. Each section consists of 11 items. This questionnaire was used as a supporting tool, rather than a research tool, it has not been formally checked for its reliability and validity.

Research Findings

Data from the interviews, observations and document analyses were transcribed and later organized using Computer Aided Software (CAQDAS) NVivo version 9.0 to enable the researchers to analyze all the data. We successfully interviewed 10 out of 12 participants from all three schools, and each school had their own key performance indicator (KPI) as a quality indicator that must align with the school's vision and mission. School leaders ensure that all their subordinates understand the school's vision and mission.

School Data

The school data will be presented in descriptive format to give the gist of achievements of the participating schools.

School A. Evidence showed that less than 10% of the students in school A obtained a 'D' grade or failed the UPSR examination in 2010–2012. These unfortunate students were among those whom school leaders called problematic students. To overcome this problem, the school leaders as well as the mathematics teachers worked together as a team to help these students by offering them extra classes early in the morning before school started. This program was called the Permata Pagi. According to the senior assistant, however, these students also had problems attending the extra classes. This was due to many reasons including that parents did not give full support for these programs.

The school also conducted another program during the morning assembly. This program was done using modules prepared by the mathematics teachers and was mainly focused on the year 4 and 5 students. This was part of the school's early program to encourage students to love mathematics and to help weak students increase their mathematics performance.

Staff meetings were held at least three times a year, and most issues discussed in the meetings primarily focused on the management part of each panel. The headmistress always stressed participation from teachers to ensure that they understood and were encouraged to appreciate the vision and mission of their school. They also were required

to have a log book to record any vital information from the meeting. This included information from the headmistress, assistant headmistress or any other teachers in the meeting.

As for the panel's meeting, each head of the panel were required to conduct a meeting after the curriculum meeting. The curriculum meeting comprised of all the heads of the panels and all the three senior assistants.

School B. Evidence from school B also showed that for the three consecutive years less than 10% of their students obtained a 'D' grade or failed the UPSR examination. Although the situation in this school is more or less the same as in school A, this school had different strategies to help their students perform in their examination. Program Quality and Quantity (Program 2Q) was conducted for the weaker year 6 students. In addition, a Mathematics Clinic was held for another group of students every Wednesday immediately after school finished as a measure to avoid absenteeism among year 6 students.

The staff meeting and the panel meeting were done as instructed by the Ministry of Education. In both meetings, the administrator and teachers decided on activities to be carried out in the academic year. Some of the activities were Mathematics Week, which was conducted annually. The mathematics panel decided what to include in the program and the suggested activities were to foster interest in this subject among students.

School C. Evidence from school C showed that about 50% of the students obtained a 'D' grade or failed the UPSR examination. The situation in this school is much different from the other two schools. According to the headmistress, Mrs. T, most of the students are from low socio-economic status. The leaders and teachers, however, have come out with a program which they call team teaching. Team teaching was conducted with the weakest class. Two teachers shared the same students or class and grouped the students into two groups with each teacher handling one group at a time.

The other program was the multiplication square grid. This was the idea of the headmistress to help those students who are weak in the concept of multiplication. Instead of memorizing the multiplication table from 1 to 9, these students were taught to master the multiplication using the multiplication square grid. Teachers were exposed to the program by the headmistress herself.

Discussion

The study found that the head teachers of schools A and B have a good leader plus aspect, capable of building relationships and have the influence to manage these relationships. Evidence showed that student performance in these two schools was higher as compared with school C. Cohen and Ball (as cited in Spillane, 2001) mentioned that to understand collaborative leadership, good interactions among all the instructional leaders and students are important. Most interactions occur in the staff meetings which were held at least three times a year. Interactions could be seen during the supervision session which is held once a year. Besides that, interactions also were done during the school assembly, eating at the school canteen, etc. Good interaction definitely builds good relationships.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) in their research stated that encouraging the heart will make people feel like a hero. Leading the way is another profile that encourages teachers to share their knowledge and collaborate with each other. Evidence from school C showed that the headmistress had prepared learning materials to be used by her students in their daily mathematics exercises. She then shared her idea with all the teachers in her school through the teacher development program.

We also found that collaborative leadership in the three schools was practiced in an informal way. Most teachers did not realize that they have adopted a collaborative leadership model in their daily routine work. In all three schools, however, we also found that school C practices collaborative leadership internally among the teachers, especially the mathematics teachers. This was observed during the mathematics class conducted in the afternoon session.

Practice Aspect

The practice aspect refers to the formal and informal interaction between leaders and followers. As stated in Lambert (2003) and Spillane (2007), no one leader can work alone in a school. Interactions between leaders and followers are very important to ensure the success of their schools. Observation showed that there were fewer interactions in school C as compared to schools A and B. However, information and directions were disseminated smoothly using various types of media such as the information board located near the headmistress' office and memos and also during meetings. Schools A and B have different scenarios in which interactions between the school leaders and followers were seen in the administrator's office.

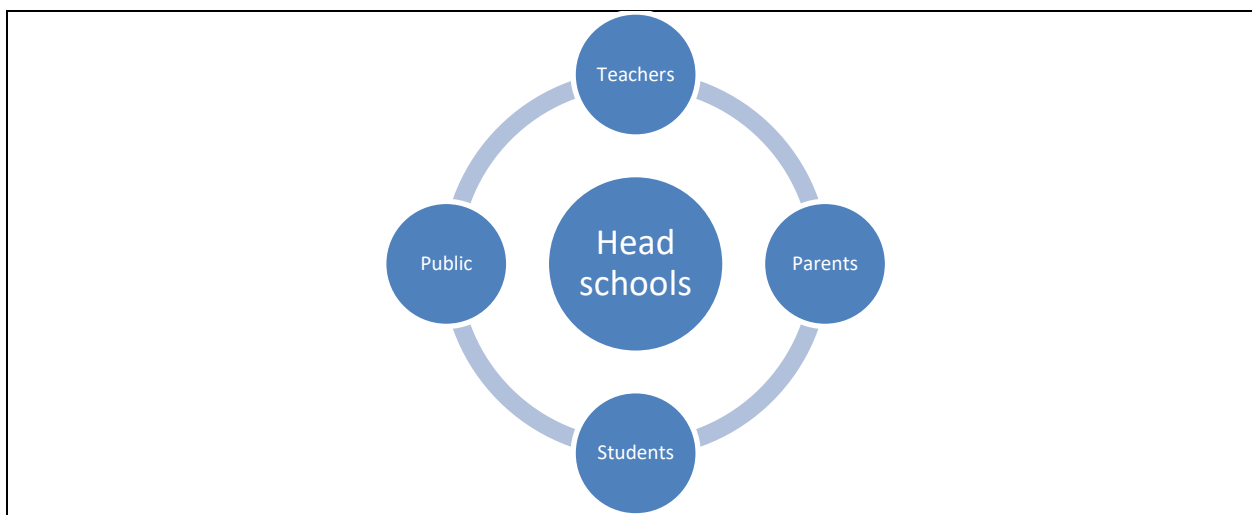
Practice aspect also is influenced greatly by the school's culture or 'the way we do things round here' as stated by Handy (as cited in Carmichael, Collins, Emsell & Haydon, 2011, p. 173). This includes norms, rules, history, stakeholders and policies.

Leader Plus Aspect

As stated in Spillane (2007), the leader plus aspect refers to multiple leadership in schools. In the context of this research, however, we found that schools in Malaysia are bound to centralized administration rather than decentralized administration as in other countries such as the United States of America. Furthermore, schools in Malaysia experience a top-down hierarchy of empowerment. Therefore, any directive must come from the Ministry of Education in Putrajaya. We also found that all the three primary schools have a similar designation of leadership among their teachers. Every school in Malaysia is given a guide book on the Standard Kualiti Pendidikan Malaysia (KPM, 2010) to ensure the quality of teaching in schools is satisfactorily.

Building Relationship

As Rubin (2009) suggested, building relationships is essential to creating or sustaining collaborative leadership in schools: *'You are a collaborative leader once you have accepted responsibility for building or helping to ensure the success of a heterogeneous team to accomplish a shared purpose'*. It is clearly stated that relationships are the foundation of collaborative leadership practice in order to gain a common purpose. As heads of schools, leaders must establish the relationship first; this can be observed in all three schools where teachers can assess their employer anytime possible. The Figure 2 shows that the heads of schools should be in the center where everybody can assess them as stated by Axner (2015) to enable strong relationships. In fact, strong relationships also can create trust among the school community. Trust will help sustain relationships, and this will help schools move forward to achieve their vision and mission.



Adapted from Axner (2015).

Figure 2. Relationships among school communities

Managing Relationships

Leadership is a two way relationship. This is so true when Llopis (2017) discover in his study that leadership should always be reciprocal. To sustain good relationships, teams must be managed effectively. As in business environment, relationships can be managed in various ways. As suggested by Llopis (2017) leadership is about actively listening and advancing ideas to others. Having good communication skills will establish good relationships.

Both schools A and B manage relationships through good rapport among the school community. Parent Teacher Associations also play important roles in establishing good relationships in the school's community. Besides that, good relationships also be developed through project-based learning to enable students to achieve a good understanding on the subject (Wagner, 2010). This can be done through team work across classes and teachers.

Aspect of Leader Plus and Relationship Management

Spillane (2007) mentioned that the leader plus aspect has shown a tremendous output in one of the schools included in his research. In Malaysia, however, we found that this aspect is not practiced properly because of the centralized kind of management for the nation's education system. Schools in Malaysia have similar routine tasks for teachers. However, the Ministry of Education does encourage teachers to have self-motivation to become excellent in their career.

According to Drucker (n.a), relationship management is a relationship between the organization and its customer. For this study, relationship management can be considered the relationship between the school organization and surrounding partner schools. So, in this case, relationship management does not exist as none of the schools has employed a partnership with the schools around them. Relationship management, however, does exist in the schools. Therefore, relationship management is an important criterion for school leaders to have partnership with nearby schools.

Conclusion

Findings show that all four aspects mentioned earlier were the main category to be adopted by all the schools' head to sustain school improvement, mainly mathematics education. All these aspects are supported by Spillane (2007) and Rubin (2009) as stated in the conceptual framework. Leaders from all these schools practiced good collaborative leadership although their style may differ from each other. Kouzes and Posner (2007) stated one of the leadership challenges is to enable others to act, which stresses leaders to foster collaboration and to build a spirited team. Managing relationships also can be done by encouraging the heart by recognizing their members' hard work.

From the analysis we can conclude that leaders should adopt effective collaborative leadership practices to help children learn mathematics as well as to learn to love the subject.

The implications of the study will enable researchers to develop a collaborative leadership profile for the Malaysian culture. Schools in Malaysia have different scenarios from other countries. Enrolment of students in each classroom also is a contributing factor for the success of any policies or programs implemented in schools.

We hope that this study will help policymakers, especially the Ministry of Education, to plan for an effective educational leadership programme in order to sustain good performance in mathematics. This is aligned with the objectives of the National Blueprint that is to meet the challenges of the 21st century, building on the foundations of the previous seminal reports and policies, and focusing on ways to develop and further pave the way for the education system's continuous growth and improvement (MOE, 2013–2025).

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