# INVESTIGATING LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EXCELLENT PRINCIPAL IN MALAYSIA

Gurnam Kaur Sidhu Ph.D
Chan Yuen Fook Ph.D
Universiti Teknologi MARA
*gurnamsidhu213@yahoo.com*
*yuenfook@salam.uitm.edu.my*

## INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership is widely accepted as being a key constituent in achieving school improvement. Research findings from diverse countries and different school contexts have revealed the powerful impact of leadership in securing school development and change (e.g., Van Velzen *et al.,* 1985; Hopkins 2001a; West *et al.,* 2000). McEwan (2003) emphasizes that, highly effective principals are 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. 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) 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).

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.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a qualitative case study method to collect and analyze the research data. Stake (1997) noted that even though case studies have not found the solutions for education's 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 much fuller access to their views across a range of issues (Gronn and Ribbins, 1996). 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 study was conducted in the Sultan Sulaiman 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 and according to the records of State Inspectorate Division, the incumbent principal 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 was the 87 teachers and 1105 students in 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 purposes 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 is 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 was followed by the following broad research questions that provided some broad guidelines to structure interview questions for the principals, teachers and students.

- What is the vision and mission of your school?
- What is your principal's leadership style?
- What is the principal's main concern in school?
- What strategies have been implemented?
- How does the principal manage the school?
- How do you evaluate your principal's contribution to the school?
- What are the strengths and limitations of your school principal?

In addition to these broad questions, the researchers also included other related questions, which were in some ways connected 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.

## 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 to be drawn.

## THE PRINCIPAL

The school principal in this study is referred to as Aminah. 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 2 schools prior to her appointment as principal at Sultan Sulaiman Secondary School in 2000. This was her first appointment as a school principal.

Prior to her appointment in 2000, the Sultan Sulaiman 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 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 grab a number of coveted awards in the educational arena of 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 conductive learning environment). Later in 2002, the school won the State Potential School Award and in 2003 won the prestigious National Minister of Education Quality Award.

## AMINAH'S LEADERSHIP STYLES

In her interview Aminah consistently highlighted the importance of possessing a 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 she used in different contexts.

## INSTRUCTIONAL / ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

Aminah 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, Sultan Sulaiman 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 possibly because Aminah always involved everyone in decision-making with regards 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 advise they needed to implement their programmes. She also cultivated the habit of developing professional dialogue between teachers by encouraging the schoolteachers and students to become inquiring communities.

According to a teacher she was also 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.

Interviews with the teachers showed 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 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.

## 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.

## 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 advise 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 S8)

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 "ok, no problem, well-done, excellent, congratulations, let's do it together, we could do it, and thank you".

Aminah was also a leader 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. 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 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.

## 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 at bit a bit too unrealistic"*. In such a scenario not every teacher is with her in spirit but they admitted that they felt that as team they had to work collaboratively with the school head. Some students felt that the school conducted 'too many activities' that 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.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

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.

What, then, are the implications for the leadership training and development of aspiring and serving school leaders? 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 headteachers. Its 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 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, 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.

## CONCLUSION

This study shed some light to the intensity and complexity of the leadership role in the school. Findings indicated that the principal is 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 values-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 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 (Leithwood *et al.*, 2000).

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 Sultan Sulaiman 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 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.

## REFERENCES

Burns, J M. (1978). *Leadership.* New York: Harper and Row.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Duignan, P A & Macpherson, R J S. (1992). Educative Leadership: A Practical Theory for New Administrators and Managers. London: Falmer Press.

Gronn, P., & Ribbins, P. (1996). Leaders in Context: Postpositivist Approaches to Understanding Educational Leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly,* 32(3), 452-473.

Hopkins, D. (2001a). *School Improvement for Real.* London: Falmer Press.

Hopkins, D. (2001b). Meeting the Challenge: An improvement Guide for Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances. London: DfES.

Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (1990). Transformational Leadership: How Principals Can Help Reform School Climates. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement,* 1(4), 249-280.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1992). *Moral Leadership: Getting to the Heart of School Improvement.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1995). *The Headteachership: A Reflective Practice Perspective.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1998). *Value-Added Leadership: How to Get Extraordinary Performance in Schools.* San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers.

Stake, R. E. (1997). Case Study Methods in Educational Research: Seeking Sweet Water. In Richard, M. Jaeger (Ed.), *Complementary Research Method for Research in Education*. Washington D. C: American Educattional Research Association.

Stoll, L & Fink, D. (1996). *Changing Our Schools*. London: Open University Press.

Tampoe, M. (1998). *Liberating Leadership*. London: The Industrial Society.

Van Velzen W., Miles, M., Elholm, M., Hameyer, U. & Robin. (1985). Belgium: ACCO.

West, M., Jackson, D., Harris, A. & Hopkins, D. (2000). Leadership for School Improvement' in K. Riley & K. Seashore Louis. *Leadership for Change*. London: Routledge Falmer Press.