

# **CHANGING THE WAY WE PREPARE OUR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS: THE BURNABY EXPERIENCE**

*Oleh:*

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## **Introduction**

This paper is a reflection of the highlights of a study tour by the authors to Burnaby School District, British Columbia, Canada in October 2002. The study tour is part of the professional development program of Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB). The discussion will begin with a brief description of why the Burnaby School District was selected and the traditions of leadership professional growth; secondly, the three main thrusts of the Burnaby Leadership Professional Growth Programs (The Professional Growth Plan, Peer Assisted Leadership Program and Professional Learning Communities). Finally, some reflection and personal learning obtained will be examined.

## **Why Burnaby School District?**

In arranging for the staff professional development, IAB sought the assistance of Simon Fraser University (SFU), British Columbia, Canada and SFU selected Burnaby as the model school district to be visited. Burnaby is the third largest suburb or district in British Columbia (B.C.) with 47 schools, 2,500 employees and 24,000 students. It is one of the fastest-growing districts in B.C. in terms of education. Burnaby School District was selected because it is seen as a leader in delivering quality education and its population has a myriad composition of ethnic groups. Due to their multicultural ethnicity, they also offer a wide variety of programs that are applicable to our own Malaysian education context. Their programs include teaching English as a second language or more commonly known as Immersion Programs. A survey of languages in 1996/97 identified approximately 70 languages other than English spoken in the homes of Burnaby students. While such diversity has brought rich cultural benefits to Burnaby's communities and schools, it has presented a significant and growing challenge for Burnaby School District Office to deliver educational programs in an effective and efficient manner.

Our situation is somewhat similar to the challenges faced by the Burnaby's communities. Like Burnaby, we also face the challenge of fostering and maintaining an overall educational climate of inclusion and integration at a time of growing public expectations for quality education. Burnaby has continued to promote the ideals of multiculturalism through the many school-based initiatives which promote cultural respect and understanding.

In addition, the strength of their leadership professional growth programs are exemplary. These include the Professional Growth programs, competency-based principal training programs, and peer assisted leadership program.

## **Traditions of Leadership Professional Growth**

Before we begin the discussion on the Burnaby leadership professional growth programs, we would like to briefly highlight the traditions of professional growth programs practised in Burnaby

until the 1990s. Both the terms of *professional growth* or more commonly known as *professional development* would be used interchangeably throughout this discussion.

Professional development for principals in Burnaby, frequently revolves around training them using externally-developed programs to update them in the latest research-based knowledge in the content areas. This is carried out through the supervisory skills program, leadership development, mastery learning, instructional strategies and collaboration, and educational technologies, to name a few from the 1970s to the late 80s. This conventional or academic approach to principal development is dominant in knowledge transfer and skill development in perspective. Embedded in the traditions of such practice in principal development are theoretical assumptions that are scarcely pronounced for scrutiny. Such a practice tend to overlook those questions, issues, dilemmas, and meanings about leadership innovation that are pertinent to principals.

However, in the late 1990s Burnaby School District moved away from the conventional practices of professional development with the appointment of a new District Superintendent and also due to financial constraints of providing sufficient professional development to all the principals and teachers. In the Malaysian school context, a Superintendent is equivalent to the position of a District Education Officer. The new Superintendent adopted non-conventional strands of teacher (principal) development. He designed the Professional Growth Program to move away from the practice of having principals write performance appraisal reports about teachers and he, in turn writing about the principals. Quoting Fullan & Hargreaves (1991), he felt that by allowing principals and teachers write their own performance action plan from their perspective would not only boost performance but also serve as a form of professional development. To give it a new image, he named it as Professional Growth Plan or the Pro-D Plan which will be discussed later in the text. Having put the system and focus of professional development in place, they then, moved on to building professional learning communities.

These non-conventional strands contest the assumption that adult learners (principals) are autonomous professionals. They possess a vast repertoire of experience, ability, and practical knowledge that they can use for their own self-directed learning as well as provide effective instructional leadership. This non-conventional or comprehensive approach emphasizes on reflective practice and it focuses critically on socio-political-cultural change.

## **VARIOUS APPROACHES TO PRINCIPAL PROFESSIONAL GROWTH**

In preparing one for principalship in Burnaby School District, various approaches are often used, both conventional and non-conventional approaches.

### **Conventional Approaches**

For the conventional or knowledge transfer and skill development strand, we would discuss three such approaches: 1) the Expert Model, 2) the Process-Product Model, and 3) the Training Model.

In the *Expert Model*, it is assumed that the provider or instructors of training has all the knowledge foundation as compared with the learners. As a result, the provider plays the role of selecting the area or areas of professional growth for the learners. The irony is that the area or areas selected for learning may be extremely theoretical based or do not match actual school leadership practices (Daresh, 1994).

Closely related and even overlapping with the expert model in many points is the *Process-Product* model. Its assumptions are very similar to those of the expert model. An expert will decide the specific and level of actions or responses or competence expected from learners and develop topics to achieve the desired competence. This approach may be known as a competence-based approach, that is, a system based on assessment of competence rather than the actual training

itself (Buckley & Caple, 1992). In actual fact, the difference between this approach from the expert model is the emphasis on thinking about *required outputs* rather than *desirable inputs*.

The third model which is the *Training Model*, is also frequently used. Equally difficult to separate this model from the models mentioned above, it is often referred to as a way of expanding, developing or modifying knowledge/ skill/ attitude through learning experience, to improve job performance (Buckley & Caple, 1992). Some tried to distinguish the three models by looking at its process, orientation (whether it minimizes or maximizes individual differences), its course or program content, method or even the effects of it on a time scale (short term or long term).

We would like to emphasize here that there is no clear dividing line between the three models. However, they all stress that professional growth is pre-determined and packaged for principals' learning. The criticism of these approaches are that professional development may not reach a deep-seated level of awareness in principals and will also likely amount to an accumulation of superficial technicalities (Grimmett & Muthwa-Kuehn, 1998) as school context may have been omitted. As a result, principals may see the knowledge or skill delivery as being imposed on them. By contrast, the non-conventional approaches to principal development represent a shift away from knowledge transfer and skill development to a focus on the person of the principal and on contextual constraints or environments.

### **Non-Conventional Approaches**

For the non-conventional or reflective practice, we would discuss approaches used in Burnaby like 1) reflective practice and 2) action research.

Reflective practices and action research are part of the broad concept of experiential learning where ideas of learners are constantly being formed and reformed by life experiences (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001). The aim of reflection is not only to observe and review their practices and the contexts or processes they are in but also to generalize abstract conceptualization as well as to carry out active experimentation ( Schon, 1983; 1991; Kolb, 1984). However, Brotherton (1991) as cited in Cheetham & Chivers (2001), argued that relying on a person's ability to discover what is useful through experience is not enough. He believes that reflective learning needs to be guided through positive assistance for instance by using action learning or research so as to structure experiential learning. Smith (1988) has similar opinion about the use of action research and defines it as the systematic, intentional inquiry by principals into their craft. This simple understanding is adopted, adapted and practised by the principals and teachers in the Burnaby School District.

### **LEADERSHIP PROFESSIONAL GROWTH: THE BURNABY'S EXPERIENCE**

Here, the authors would discuss three main thrusts of the Burnaby Leadership Professional Growth Programs. These programs are towards a more learner-focused curriculum. Several assumptions which are central to curricular, structural and ideological change are employed here:

1. Each professional educator wishes to grow in professional effectiveness;
2. There is a commonly held belief system of professional values and desired outcomes;
3. A healthy educational culture which subscribes to:
  - Effective learning for students as the major goal;
  - People are regarded as able, valuable and responsible persons;
  - Collaboration and mutual trust elicit confidence in formative process.

## The Professional Development Plan (Pro-D Plan)

The Professional Development or Growth Plan (Pro-D Plan) provides an opportunity to focus on one aspect of the principals' (and teachers') professional growth and at the same time to deliberately develop their instructional leadership (and classroom practices) in that area. The principals (and teachers) have a choice in choosing one area of focus, goal and level of challenge. These choices and selections are expected to vary from one principal (teacher) to another principal (teacher) depending on individual backgrounds, interests, previous experiences and current leadership (teaching) situations. The principals are given time off to plan and write out their own Professional Growth Plan or Action Plan (refer Figure 1) for the coming year. To outline and also to guide their implementation, the plan includes a list of activities that they will undertake, and a timeline is included where necessary and appropriate. The principals (teachers) are also encouraged to include any background reading or research into their leadership (instructional) strategies as well as a school implementation (classroom) overview. In addition, the plan delineated should also indicate the signs or evidence that the principal (teacher) will look for to indicate that he or she has moved toward his or her goal.

Once they have drafted their plan, both the principals and the teachers are also encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

- a. Will I learn something new and worthwhile from this project?
- b. Is my focus area worthy of a significant investment of time and energy?
- c. Is my goal clear enough that I can identify specific practices I want to try?
- d. Is my project manageable within reasonable time frame?
- e. Have I tried to anticipate problems that might arise and how I might deal with them?

Figure 1: Professional Growth Plan

<b>Focus</b>	:	Briefly describe the idea / innovation you wish to implement
<b>GOAL</b>	:	Identify what you hope to achieve as a result of this project. Make sure your goals are challenging yet realistic for the time frame.
<b>PLAN</b>	:	Outline the actions you intend to take to achieve your goal. Include an approximate timeline to guide your action.
<b>RESOURCES</b>	:	List materials you may need to complete your plan. Include readings, software, reference material and /or other resources.
<b>SUPPORT SYSTEM</b>	:	Suggest people who can help you achieve your goal, including your implementation support group as well as appropriate resource people.
<b>ASSESSMENT</b>	:	Indicate how you will monitor the implementation of the project and how you will judge your success in achieving the goals or desired outcomes.  1. <b>Monitoring Procedures :</b>  2. <b>Outcome Assessment :</b>

This Professional Growth Plan is not rigidly kept. The principals and teachers are reminded that as they try new practices, they would need to make modifications in the plan in response to unanticipated events along the way. Changes are expected to be made to the plan during implementation.

### **Administrative Professional Growth Plan**

As the Administrative Professional Growth Plan is primarily intended to help administrators to have reflective self-professional growth, and developmental in nature, provided within a cooperative, supportive environment, the principals are not left isolated in their efforts in trying to attain their goals. Several provisions are given including:

1. **Research** where appropriate professional literature on effective leadership are made available to the use of administrators. As reasoned by Froese (2000), the Administrative Professional Growth Plan architect, the professional literature and information about effective instructional leadership and supervisory models are intended to provide a practical conceptual base for the improvement of leadership in the schools.
2. **District Team** where a team comprising of superintendents and administrators are responsible in bringing the literature mentioned above to the attention of the administrators. This team also plays a role in assisting the administrators to review and examine both the information on effective instruction and leadership.
3. **Supervisory Models** where each administrator in consultation with the Superintendent will select the most appropriate supervisory model for his/her situation. Based on this model, the administrator then draft a written action plan to achieve his goal. An outline of the plan has to be ready by 1<sup>st</sup> November of each year and a copy will be kept by both administrator and Superintendent. A sample of the outline of the action plan is shown in Figure 2.

The administrator can choose an area of growth to be focused on and along the way, make thoughtful self-assessment, progressive adjustments or modifications as well as in getting ongoing professional feedback. Some of the possible areas of growth outlined by the Burnaby School District include the following:

- Planning and Goal Setting
- Instructional Leadership
- Communication and Group Processes
- Supervision and Evaluation of Staff and Programs
- Professional Growth and Development
- Community Relations
- Organization and Management

**Figure 2: Framework for Professional Growth**

**AREA: COMMUNICATION AND GROUP PROCESS**

**A. DEMONSTRATES CONCERN FOR PEOPLE**

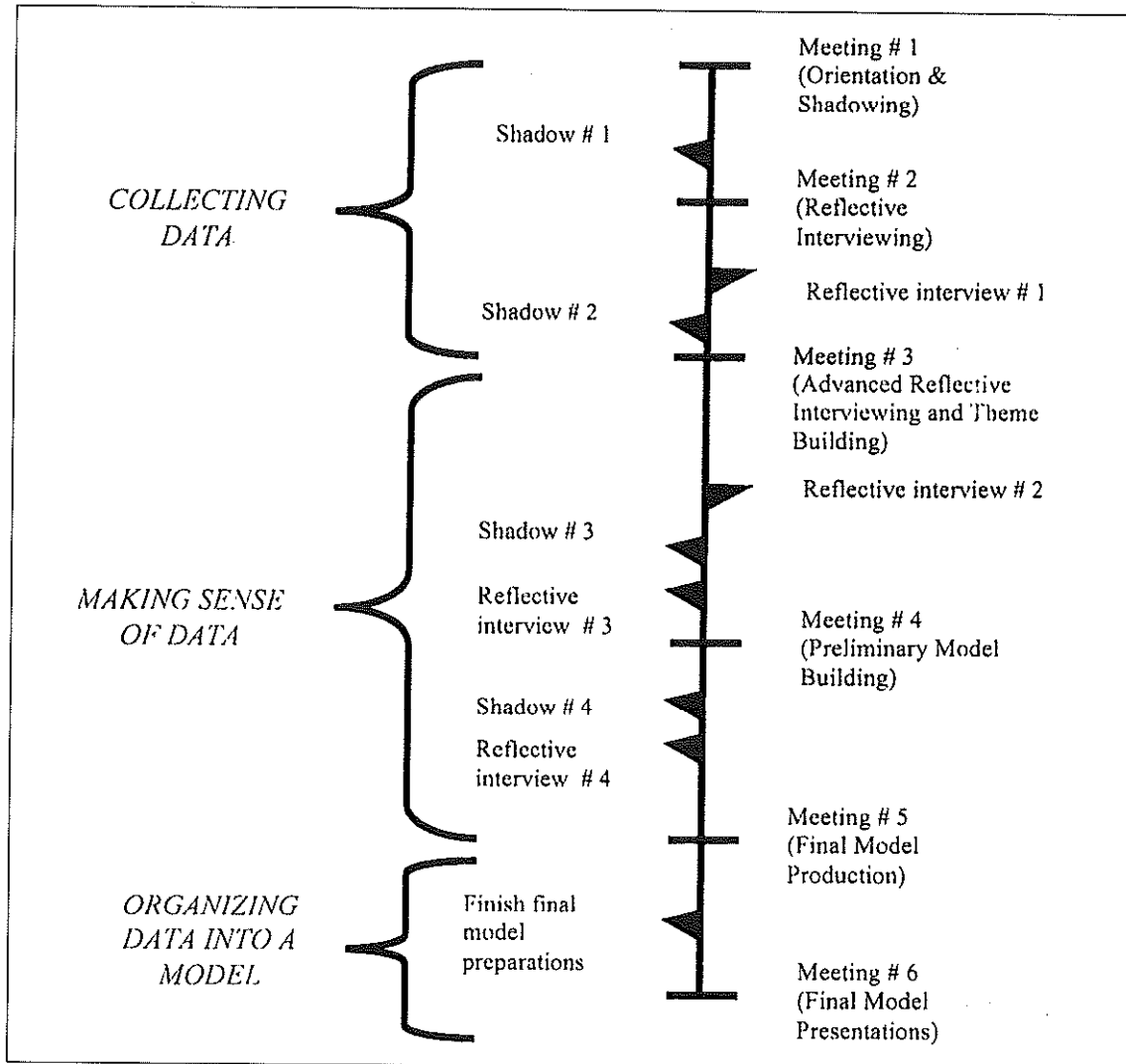
Indicators	Strength	Growth
1. Encourages and models caring and respect for and acceptance of others.		
2. Works to develop an atmosphere of openness and trust		
3. Is approachable, considerate of and available to students, staff and community		
4. Models and encourage collaboration.		

<p><b>REFLECTIVE COMMENTS</b></p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>AREAS OF STRENGTH/GROWTH</b></p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

***Peer Assisted Leadership (PAL Program)***

PAL, a year long professional development program was established by the Far West Laboratory staff, a consulting company employed by the Burnaby School District in the 1990s. The program has been carried out for the last four years. This program is implemented in view that principals are often isolated by the position they assume although they need learning throughout their lives. In this program, principals inquire together about the meanings and consequences of their leadership.

**Figure 3 : Peer Assisted Leadership (PAL Program)**



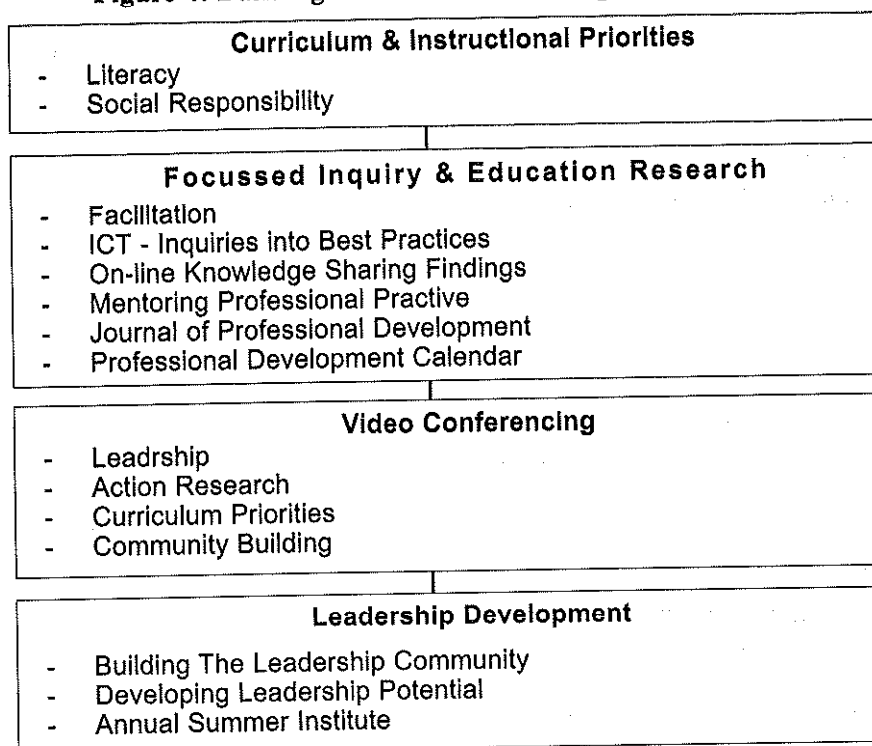
A principal will select a partner, preferably someone whom they would like to get to know better, work with the person for over a year by taking turns to shadow one another for at least five times a year. They can pick a partner either from the secondary or primary school. Among the activities carried out include shadowing, reflective interviewing, theme building, theme diagramming, constructing models, and employing the General Framework of Instructional Leadership (refer to Figure 3). It is intended that this program be a non-prescriptive, nonjudgmental stimulus for professional growth.

While conducting PAL training, Far West Laboratory staff gathered the principals' reactions to the materials and activities through tape-recording, and written comments. Evidence gathered indicates that PAL program has enabled principals to examine their own leadership styles and actions; learn and apply new techniques and strategies; reduce feelings of isolation; and organize thoughts and actions about instructional leadership. At the end of the program, the principals would come together to celebrate their presentations over lunch. They would present the positive themes of the leadership of their partner in a model or diagram form that they had observed and built for instance 'a school with a heart'.

## Professional Learning Communities

In the late 1990s to the present, using an Integrated Model, the Burnaby School District principals tried to build a self-help supportive professional learning community (refer Figure 4). Emulating what is described in Senge's (1990) and Joyce, Weil & Showers's (1992) book, they build their ethos around the continuous study of teaching and learning. Using the peer coaching concept, principals work together to expand their leadership repertoire. A council with study teams were set up to facilitate learning. Each principal has membership in a team of two or three (e.g. on-line knowledge –sharing findings) whose members support and coach one another in study. Each team is linked to one or two others, forming a study group of no more than six members. Team members support one another as they study academic content of leadership, teaching and learning skills and strategies. At monthly weekend workshops, principals in teams take turns teaching one another. Thus, members get to see other principals practise a particular strategy while others who play the role of participants then make plans to try a couple of prototype leadership strategies for their schools over the next month.

**Figure 4: Building Professional Learning Communities**



The emphasis is on reflective practice or focused inquiry on curriculum and instructional priorities, the sharing of findings and newly acquired knowledge and practices through on-line learning and leadership development. It is believed that focused inquiry and action research will help the professional learning community to develop a mind-set and a "culture of curiosity" and become skilled in the process of posing questions and seeking answers to problems related to their craft. When principals are always asking "what if..." questions, in turn, they would help schools to become "Centres of Inquiry".

When the phenomenon of mutually supportive learning communities emerges in an educational setting, principals become connected in a lively and coherent fashion (Grimmett & Muthwa-Kuehn, 1998). The Professional learning community mentioned above facilitates planning, observing, analyzing, and communication between members of study groups who are involved in a continuing experiment on leadership strategies.



## Reflections on the Principal Professional Growth in Malaysia

Having journeyed so far to learn and inquire into the best practices of another school district in a foreign land, we would like to share some of our own findings and observations with reference to our own current practices. However, getting the right tone and approach for this discussion turned out not to be an easy task at all. There is always the danger of being over-critical and not being able to see the strength of our own education practices or the shift of the pendulum to the extreme of being over-defensive and refusing to change and to overcome weaknesses. We'd like to be reflective as we go about the task of sharing with you. We'd like to invite you to be reflective too. What we are about to share is personal and we'd like to not take this any more zealously than necessary.

Some reflections on the strength and shortcomings in the preparation of administrators include:

i. *Using Local Knowledge*

Training centres are still expected to continue to play the role of being the expert in selecting and providing pre-determined training for educational growth. We do not deny that the provision of training through external experts does enable leaders to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned in leading their schools. However, this traditional way of thinking has led to the estrangement between the world of administration and the world of leadership learning and experimentation. There appears to be a gap between theory learning and actual practices in the field; and a widening cavity between passive receivers and active initiators of knowledge.

There appears to be a state of dependency on the part of the administrator who waits for educational researchers to discover new leadership practices and to design new courses. As a result, having gone through and tolerated the 'tough' training given, salary increment and promotional opportunities are expected to be awarded at the end of the training period.

In Burnaby, educational professionals learn because they believe in continuous and life-long learning. Even without any monetary and promotional rewards, they simply have the love for learning and the thirst for knowledge. In its place, they have a celebration over lunch to mark the adventure of learning.

Attending training courses or obtaining outside knowledge is but one of the many approaches to learning. We feel that present day administrators can play an even more pro-active role in acquiring their own knowledge on leadership informally through reflection (Schon, 1983; Mezirow, 1990; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), reading, experimenting, evaluation and peer coaching. Even documenting their own practice is a form of learning as it produces knowledge. By taking ownership of one's own learning, one will reduce reliance on experts for knowledge which may not be relevant and practical at all to one's own school context. Besides closing the gap of learning between theory and practice, pro-active learners will also acquire new skills and new-found confidence (Jarvis, 1997) to generate new knowledge. As suggested by Kohl (1988), administrators can certainly fulfill a more productive role as a school leader by infusing into their daily life of educational practice an inquiring sensibility. Recognizing that local knowledge may be as important as research knowledge will ultimately change the way we think about what counts for professional development.

ii. *Focussed Inquiry and Research*

Systematic and intentional inquiry by principals into their craft or work appear to be lacking in Malaysia. An even greater concern is the lack in producing a publication that highlights professional development initiatives and disseminates the results of our inquiries and action research although there were some attempts made by some of the districts and states. A number of districts and states have organized seminars, and conferences as well as published the literary works of principals to be shared with other colleagues. However, we feel that the element of systematic inquiry and experimentation has yet to be given emphasis.

According to Garvin (1993), leaders and members of a learning organization can no longer rely on 'gut' feelings or facts to make effective decisions. Principals need to actively manage the learning process in school to ensure that it occurs by relying on scientific inquiry rather than guesswork or chance. This is because of increasing public expectations that demand accurate and precise diagnosing and solving of problems based on data as concrete evidence. These data can be gathered by using simple statistical tools. On a note of caution, Garvin reminded that these statistical tools are relatively straight-forward and easily communicated to the community; but the necessary mind-set is more difficult to be established.

iii. *Bottom-up Growth Leadership*

While some say that the Pro-D Plan of Burnaby is similar to the Yearly Work Targets (SKT) here. The Yearly Work Targets outline more of the organizational goals and needs, not individual internalized goals. It is still very much top-down not bottom-up. The top-down leadership assumes that principals and teachers will use pre-determined knowledge through research by experts to better their practice. However, this view has ignored the realities of principals' (and teachers') work-lives. They are affected by federal/state/ district policies (e.g. standards and assessments), community and most importantly their teachers and students' abilities, needs, interest and background.

Very often, the top-down leadership is said to stifle professional growth rather than encourage growth. Basically, individuals want to be involved in the decision making that affects what they do.

As discussed earlier, the Professional Growth Plan gives the individual the opportunity to identify their own needs and goals without external help. Rather than receiving from a pre-determined leadership training program, the principals have a say or choice in determining their own school management and leadership strategies which are best for a particular school.

Likewise, with this plan, it gives teachers ownership of what they do. Rather than working from a set curriculum with a specific scope and sequence which has been developed by someone else, teachers are more involved in making fundamental curricular decisions about what is best for a particular student or group learners. It is giving people shared ownership of decisions without giving them the anxiety that things can rebound on them if they go wrong. As a result, this encourages people to learn.

We see in Burnaby that bottom-up growth leadership encourages principal and teacher knowledge. It is also far more sensitive to the contexts that help shape principal and teacher

practice. However, very often these ventures of trying to abandon the centralized approaches will take a long time becoming institutionalized (Lieberman & Miller, 2000).

iv. *Cognitive and Conceptual Growth*

Another observation is that through the Peer Assisted Leadership Program, the administrators in Burnaby School District are encouraged to have a strong and sound conceptual foundation regarding leadership for the improvement of it in schools. They were encouraged to visualize the leadership of their peers in themes and categories of leadership. This practise can be emulated in our training programs where instead of participants writing long essays as assignments, they perhaps can reflect on their practices and illustrate their ideas in a model or diagram. Being able to put thoughts into models indicates that knowledge gained has been thought through and above all that it has made sense or given meaning to them. Thus, what is meaningful would be more readily internalized and practiced in daily lives resulting in actions being consistent with words uttered. In addition, principals who want to be successful change agents need conceptual frameworks for understanding schools as organizations and need to know how to collect data, how to feed it back, and how to help teachers plan action (Miles, 1993).

v. *Building Professional Learning Communities*

As observed in Burnaby, building learning communities through coaching and mentoring (Daloz, 1999) is part and parcel of professional growth. The strategy of forming self-help academic study groups or teams as proven by the Burnaby experience, is demonstrated at the individual level with teachers and students; the school level with administrators and teachers working in conjunction and at the district level with superintendent and principals working in one accord. This type of coaching is also known as cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994).

The concept of a school (district) as a learning community with a focus on the students is a wonderful idea. However, to make it a reality, principals need to create a productive learning climate which is nonjudgmental and empowering to help everyone learn. Research on training has proven that teachers can be wonderful learners who can master any kind of teaching strategy or implement almost any kind of sensible curriculum – if the appropriate conditions are provided (Joyce et al., 1992; Matthews, 1999; Day, Harris & Hadfield, 2001). In this condition of collegiality (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2001), individuals learn autonomously while simultaneously act interdependently within the group. This situation of facilitating mutual learning can only exist with essential characteristics of trust in self, trust between individuals, and trust in the coaching process.

In our own situation, the coaching relationship is perhaps done by some, informally, often between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced mentee who are familiar with each other. Perhaps there is a need for more understanding of the merits of systematically organized and structured peer coaching or cognitive coaching as well. Ideally, 'coaching teams' should be developed during training to ensure its successful implementation. To be able to coach other principals or even teachers, cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994) should be based upon some fundamental beliefs about leadership, human growth and learning or teaching (Bullock, 2002). It starts with beliefs or visions, then implementation of it. Successful coaching provides not only companionship, analysis of one's practices and

application but also adaptation to real environments (Joyce et al., 1992; Danzig, 1997) through mental and emotional support.

## Conclusion

It is not difficult to see some themes in this odyssey. First, it's clear how the paradigms of professional development have changed and transformed over the last two decades in Burnaby. The word 'professional development' itself has expanded to become 'professional growth' to provide a more positive and motivating concept to principals and teachers.

With the nature of school leadership going through significant changes, principals in particular, need new kinds of knowledge, attitudes and skills to perform their work effectively and efficiently. At the same time there is a need to re-examine the appropriateness, relevancy and applicability of the training provided for beginning and practicing principals (Lahui-Ako, 2001).

Instead of using the linear conventional approaches of providing professional knowledge through experts or trainers, Burnaby School District chose to use non-conventional approaches of reflective practice and action research through networks or partnerships. Knowledge is generated and shared in the context of school leadership by principals themselves through the Pro-D Plan, PAL Program and Professional Learning Communities.

Upon reflection of our own professional growth experiences, there are grounds for optimism and pessimism. On the bright side, many of our principals have the awareness of the importance of professional growth and the commitment in promoting it. On the other hand, as we look ahead to what the next decade will bring, we have a whole range of questions to deal with such as using local knowledge, focused inquiry and research, bottom-up growth leadership, cognitive and conceptual growth, and the building of professional learning communities. We feel that these trends in principal learning and professional growth hold the greatest promise for maintaining a leadership force equipped for the task of leading and educating the next generation of Malaysians. To do so, principals will need all the clarity, creativity and energy that they can muster in bringing positive, and constructive changes to their own as well as their staff's professional growth.



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