SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN THE 21st CENTURY: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Education is increasingly regarded as the key to economic and social development. Many governments, including Malaysia, are reforming their education systems to bring about school improvement. This paper will explore the leadership implications of educational reform, in recognition that change succeeds, or may falter, at the school level. The paper will examine the nature and scope of school leadership and consider how good leaders manage their schools. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education 2012) advocates instructional leadership and the paper will address what this means for school leaders. The paper will consider the evidence on the impact of school leadership on learner outcomes and discuss the implications of reform for the development of leaders.

Education Systems in the 21st Century – Towards Decentralisation

Educational leaders in every country operate within a legislative and policy framework set by government. These frameworks differ along a number of overlapping dimensions:

- Centralisation and decentralisation
- System and school-level decision-making
- Hierarchy and stakeholder participation
- Autonomy and accountability
- Sufficient scope for leaders to act but within an agreed framework

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education 2012) addresses all these issues.

Malaysia Education Blueprint

The Malaysia Education Blueprint is an ambitious and wide-ranging document, which analyses Malaysia's current educational status and sets out strategies for development. All governments scrutinise the international comparative tables on learner outcomes. This is a sensible recognition of the need to have a highly educated workforce to compete in a global knowledge-based economy. The Blueprint shows that Malaysia's educational performance was below average in the 2009 PISA rankings, in reading, mathematics and science, despite education spending being above the OECD average. The countries and territories performing best in these rankings are mostly in Asia; China (Shanghai), Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan. The only consistently high performing country outside Asia is Finland (PISA 2009).

It is tempting to emulate the practices in these very successful nations. England, for example, has sent educational task forces to China and Finland, to try to establish why they are successful, but the reasons differ and it is hard to develop an international template for success. Every country has its own culture and contextual variables, which makes policy borrowing unwise. In China, there is very high parental commitment to education, which means that children spend a high proportion of their time (in and out of school) learning. In Finland, the best graduates are attracted into the teaching profession, rather than law, engineering or medicine, and all prospective teachers must be educated to master's level.

The Blueprint does not succumb to the temptation to model the Malaysian education system on these high performing systems. However, it does set out five 'system aspirations':

- Access
- Quality
- Equity
- Unity
- Efficiency

These are worthy aspirations. In particular, they address inequitable outcomes for boys (a global problem), in rural areas, and for children from poorer families (see also Dahlan et al 2010 and Othman and Muijs 2013).

Factors Affecting Learner Outcomes

The international literature (e.g. Leithwood et al 2006, Robinson 2007) discusses the four main factors which influence learner outcomes. These are:

- Socio-economic factors, including class, gender, race and ethnicity, and school context).
- Structure of the education system, including support and resources.
- Classroom teaching, notably teacher quality and commitment.
- School leadership, including scope, quality and training.

All these issues are addressed in the Blueprint.

WHAT IS SCHOOL LEADERSHIP?

School leadership is an internal function, which embraces all aspects devolved to school level. As noted above, education systems vary in the extent to which they devolve decision-making to school leaders. A wider scope makes good use of school leaders' talents, knowledge and skills, and provides the potential for innovation and creativity. According to Caldwell (2008), schools are the centre of change and significant levels of devolution increase the prospects for enhanced school and student outcomes. However, many education systems prefer a more centralised model, as this provides greater consistency across schools and adherence to central policies. The weakness of excessive centralisation, though, is that school leaders may become over cautious and look to the Ministry of Education to solve every problem. I will provide a Malaysian example of this problem in a later section of the paper.

Who are School Leaders?

School leadership has traditionally been configured as a solo activity, with the principal having the decisive role, especially within hierarchical systems. However, there is increasing recognition that it should be a shared function, with other leaders supporting the principal. While principals are ubiquitous, found in all education systems, other levels of leadership vary across countries. Increasingly, though, deputy and/or assistant principals can be found, and most nations have middle leaders, who typically exercise a subject management role. In many countries, leaders work together in senior leadership or management teams (Bush and Glover 2012, Bush and Glover 2013a). Team work, when it is effective, strengthens and broadens leadership and provides a coherent and consistent message about school policies and decisions (Bush and Glover 2012).

Another important consideration is that leadership is defined as ‘influence’ and is not confined to those with formal managerial roles. Wise leaders encourage the growth of informal leadership, for example through teacher leaders, as it provides greater leadership density and avoids excessive pressure on the principal.

School Leadership and the Malaysian Education Blueprint

According to Madden (2009), Malaysian school leadership is modelled on England. This seems to include the introduction of the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leadership (NPQEL), based on the English National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). The Blueprint reflects the importance of leadership in raising learner outcomes but it is very ambitious in its intention that every school will have a high performing principal. I am not aware of any education system where this is the case. The Blueprint signals an intention to work towards this aim in several ways:

- Tenure-based selection will be replaced by a process which focuses on the demonstration of leadership competences.
- Every principal will be required to complete NPQEL before they can be appointed.
- The Ministry will institute a succession planning process that identifies and cultivates high potential individuals.

- The leadership base will be strengthened with assistant principals, subject heads and department heads being developed as instructional leaders in their own right.

These are all sensible policies which should contribute to improving the overall standard of leadership in Malaysia's school but they would not be enough to ensure high performance in every school. The decision to provide coaching for under-performing principals, and to redeploy those who consistently underperform as teachers in another school, suggests a 'carrot and stick' approach and a determination to address weak leadership.

These leadership strategies have also been employed in other education systems. More countries are requiring that their leaders are trained before appointment (e.g. Canada, France, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, United States and Wales) but this decision has recently been reversed in England (Bush 2013a). England recently instituted a succession planning process, intended to improve the supply and quality of leaders (Bush 2011, 2012). As noted above, developing other senior and middle leaders also contributes to enhanced leadership density and quality. Coaching and mentoring are widely used to develop school principals (Bush 2008). Only Singapore deals with under-performance by downgrading principals, although England may close under-performing schools, leading to the principals losing their jobs.

Overall, the package of measure signalled in the Blueprint has the potential to make a significant positive impact on leadership quality, as a step to system transformation.

Models of School Leadership

High performing principals generally deploy a range of leadership approaches, based on careful assessment of the school context and the situation being addressed. Eight of these theories are reviewed in this section, drawing on Leithwood et al (1999), Bush (2011), and Bush and Glover (2013b).

Instructional leadership

The Blueprint stresses the importance of instructional leadership, which emphasises teaching and learning as the core activities of educational institutions. The emphasis is on the direction and impact of influence rather than the influence process itself.

> *'Instructional leadership . . . typically assumes that the critical focus for attention by leaders is the behaviour of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students' (Leithwood et al 1999: 8).*

Instructional leadership is the longest established concept linking leadership and learning. However, several other terms may be used to describe this relationship, including pedagogic leadership and leadership for learning. However, instructional leadership has been criticised on two grounds. First, it is perceived to be primarily concerned with teaching rather than learning (Bush 2013b). Second, it is focused too much on the principal as the centre of expertise, power and authority' (Hallinger 2003: 330). As a consequence, it tends to ignore or underplay the role of other leaders such as deputy principals, middle managers, leadership teams, and classroom teachers. Lambert (2002: 37) notes that 'the days of the lone instructional leader are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for the entire school without the substantial participation of other educators'. The Blueprint recognizes this point by its focus on the instructional role of other senior and middle leaders.

Managerial leadership

Managerial leadership assumes that the focus of leaders ought to be on functions, tasks and behaviours and that, if these functions are carried out competently, the work of others in the organisation will be facilitated. Leithwood et al (2009: 15) say that 'there is evidence of considerable support in the literature and among practicing leaders for managerial approaches to leadership'. Managerial leadership is often found in centralised systems, as principals focus their attention on responding to the demands of the bureaucracy, rather than the needs of their learners and stakeholders. Principals derive their authority from their position rather than their expertise as educational leaders (Bush 2011a). The Blueprint refers to this model as 'administrative leadership.

Transformational Leadership

This form of leadership assumes that higher levels of personal commitment to organisational goals, and greater capacities for accomplishing those goals, are assumed to result in extra effort and greater productivity (Leithwood et al 1999: 9). Leithwood's (1994: 506) research concludes that transformational leadership practices had significant direct and indirect effects on progress with school-restructuring initiatives and teacher-perceived student outcomes. The transformational model focuses primarily on the process by which leaders seek to influence school outcomes rather than on the nature or direction of those outcomes. However, transformational language is also used by governments to encourage, or require, practitioners to adopt and implement centrally-determined policies. Capacity building is essential if principals are to become effective transformational leaders, as the Blueprint implies.

Moral leadership

The moral leadership model is based on the values, beliefs and ethics of leaders. Authority and influence are derived from defensible conceptions of what is right or good (Leithwood et al, 1999: 10). Several other terms have also been used to describe values-based leadership, including ethical, authentic and spiritual leadership. West-Burnham (1997: 241) says that moral leadership requires the capacity to act in a way that is consistent with an ethical system. While most people can identify with a moral approach to leadership, it is not always easy to enact, as I shall show later. It should also be noted that both moral and managerial leadership are required. 'The challenge of leadership is to make peace with two competing imperatives, the managerial and the moral. The two imperatives are unavoidable and the neglect of either creates problems' (Sergiovanni 1991: 329).

Participative leadership

Hoyle and Wallace (2005: 124) say that participation refers to 'the opportunities that staff members have for engaging in the process of organizational decision-making'. This model is based on the assumptions that participation is justified by democratic principles and by the belief that it will increase school effectiveness. Participative leadership has been superseded by distributed leadership in much of the literature.

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership has become the normatively preferred leadership model in the 21st century. Harris (2010: 55) states that it 'represents one of the most influential ideas to emerge in the field of educational leadership in the past decade'. An important starting point for understanding distributed leadership is to uncouple it from positional authority. As Harris (2004: 13) indicates, 'distributed leadership concentrates on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organization rather than seeking this only through formal position or role'. This means that it is not easy to accommodate within traditional hierarchical structures. Heads and principals retain much of the formal authority in schools, leading Hartley (2010: 82) to conclude that 'distributed leadership resides uneasily within the formal bureaucracy of schools'. However, as schools gain more autonomy, as indicated in the Blueprint, a distributed approach may be just as valid as formal managerial leadership. Gronn's (2010: 77) 'hybrid' model of leadership may offer the potential to harness the best of both individual and distributed approaches.

Teacher leadership

There are clear links between teacher leadership and distributed leadership. Frost (2008: 337) characterises the former as involving shared leadership, teachers' leadership of development work, teachers' knowledge building, and teachers' voice. Muijs and Harris's (2007: 961) research in three UK schools showed that 'teacher leadership was seen to empower teachers, and contributed to school improvement through this empowerment and the spreading of good practice and initiatives generated by teachers'. They conclude that 'teacher leadership requires active steps to be taken to constitute leadership teams and provide teachers with leadership roles. A culture of trust and collaboration is essential' (ibid: 126).

Contingent leadership

The models of leadership examined above are all partial. They provide valid and helpful insights into one particular aspect of leadership. None of these models provide a complete picture of school leadership. As Lambert (1995: 2) notes, there is 'no single best type'. The contingent model provides an alternative approach, recognizing the diverse nature of school contexts, and the advantages of adapting leadership styles to the particular situation, rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' stance. As Vanderhaar, Munoz and Rodosky (2007) suggest, leadership is contingent on the setting. Leadership requires effective diagnosis of problems, followed by adopting the most appropriate response to the issue or situation (Morgan 1997).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

The leadership typology discussed in this paper provides many clues for heads, senior and middle leaders, and senior leadership teams. Managerial leadership, operating through the hierarchy, can mandate clearly targeted change, such as a stronger focus on examination and test scores. However, this often depends on a single leader and may not lead to sustainable change. Transformational leadership approaches aim to widen commitment to school-wide objectives, through the development of shared vision, but the 'vision' is often that of the head or principal with acquiescence, rather than genuine commitment, from teachers and other staff.

The limitations of the hierarchy have led to a plethora of alternative models; participative, distributed and teacher leadership, which are all designed to broaden leadership and to stress lateral as well as vertical relationships. These are often manifested in team-based structures. Bush and Glover's (2012) study of high performing senior leadership teams showed their value in providing coherence and leadership 'density'.

While there are different approaches to leadership and management, a focus on leadership for learning, or 'instructional leadership', is an essential element for successful schooling, as the Blueprint advocates. Contingent leadership suggests that a flexible approach is required but attention to leadership for learning should be non-negotiable.

Enacting Instructional Leadership

The Blueprint's emphasis on instructional leadership echoes much of the international research and literature. However, relatively little guidance is available for principals and other leaders seeking to adopt this approach (Bush 2013b).

Hallinger and Heck (1999) argue that learning-centred leaders influence learning and teaching in three ways:

1. *Directly, by personal intervention*
   This may be enacted through their own teaching, or through modelling good practice.

2. *Reciprocally, by their work alongside other teachers*
   This may be enacted through classroom observation and constructive feedback.

3. *Indirectly, via other staff*
   This may be enacted, for example, through dialogue with teachers.

The third approach is the most common because it is usually teachers, not principals, who work directly with learners in the classroom. Instructional leaders may be engaged in monitoring and evaluation of learning.

Southworth (2004: 79) says that monitoring includes analysing and acting on students' progress and outcome data, for example assessment and test scores. 'Leadership is stronger when it is informed by data on students' learning, progress and achievements as well as by direct knowledge of teaching practices and classroom dynamics' (p.79). He adds that monitoring involves visiting classrooms, observing teachers at work and providing them with feedback. The English Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (2003) found that there was a very strong link between good monitoring and good teaching. Southworth (ibid: 80) adds that 'monitoring classrooms is now an accepted part of leadership'. He concludes that monitoring is a widely distributed role, including head teachers, deputies and heads of department.

As noted above, evaluation means assessing teaching and learning at a strategic level, for example through analysing examination and test scores, and devising strategies for improvement. This should be addressed on a whole-school basis and at the level of individual learning areas. An effective evaluation programme would:

- Provide a systematic review of performance across learning areas, with an appraisal of the reasons for perceived under-performance. These reasons should go beyond 'blame the learner' responses to a careful assessment of how educators and leaders can work towards improved outcomes.
- Devise context-based strategies to enhance learner outcomes. These might include professional development for educators, modelling of good practice by effective teachers, and monitoring the performance of less effective educators.
- Address within-school variation (see below) by asking more successful educators and managers to mentor those who are less successful.

(Bush and Glover 2009)

Within-school variation

It is widely recognised that the school's context has a significant impact on learner outcomes. As noted in the Blueprint, socio-economic factors, gender, and rural/urban differences, influence examination and test scores. There are no such contextual constraints when comparing outcomes across learning areas *within* a school. One important aspect of evaluation, therefore, is analysis of within-school variation. Leaders should carry out a forensic analysis of differences across subjects and act on the findings. Reynolds (2007: 18) stresses that there should be a collegial approach to addressing within-school variation, leading to a clear focus on teaching and learning. This requires the development of high-quality observational systems.

Observation

O'Sullivan (2006: 253) stresses that educational quality can only be improved if there is systematic observation of what is happening in the classroom. Observation may be used for teacher development or as a tool for teacher assessment or performance management. A teacher development focus targets the improvement of teaching and learning while a performance management approach is more instrumental, seeking to 'weed out' inadequate teachers. Observation needs to be seen as a formative process, intended to raise standards of classroom practice, if it is to gain the co-operation of educators, but O'Sullivan (2006: 258) comments that much observation is assessment and performance-management driven.

Observation needs to be regarded as a 'normal' aspect of school management if it is to become embedded. This is likely to require a paradigm shift in many schools, prompted by firm but supportive leadership. One way for principals to encourage acceptance of observation is to invite educators to observe their own teaching, a form of reflective practice, and to provide feedback. Some principals may lack the confidence to do this, but it does provide the potential to 'model' good classroom practice (Bush and Glover 2009).

Modelling

Where teachers' pedagogic skills are weak, monitoring alone is unlikely to be effective in raising standards. Identifying aspects needing improvement is only a starting point. Good feedback is essential but this may need to be supported by professional development. While workshops may help to improve classroom teaching, modelling of good practice by the principal, or another senior leader, is more likely to be produce favourable outcomes.

Southworth (2004: 78) claims that 'modelling is all about the power of example'. Successful leaders are aware that they must set an example and use their actions to show how colleagues should behave. The concept of 'role model' underpins this approach. 'Learning-centred leaders are role models to others because they are interested in learning, teaching and classrooms' (ibid: 79). Modelling provides the potential for demonstrating good practice and generalising it throughout the school. I noted earlier that China is ranked highly in the PISA rankings of learner performance. Their middle managers make extensive use of modelling and observation to raise standards of teaching and learning (Bush, Coleman and Si 1998).

Autonomy and Accountability

The Education Blueprint signals enhanced school autonomy, notably in respect of operational decision-making, including budget allocation and curriculum implementation. This shift is consistent with the international evidence that autonomous schools are more likely to succeed than those constrained by the external bureaucracy. However, much depends on the extent of autonomy and international evidence shows a wide range of practice (Caldwell 2008). The Blueprint states that all schools and districts must remain aligned to the Ministry's strategic priorities. It also refers to tailored district 'support' for schools. Light touch support is consistent with school autonomy but a heavier touch may compromise it. As with many large-scale policy initiatives, the 'devil is in the detail'. The Blueprint also stresses that autonomy will be accompanied by 'sharper accountability' for school principals. This is a common feature of devolution programmes (Glatter 2012), but high performing systems ensure that heightened accountability is focused on outcomes, not on process, which should be left to school leaders to determine.

Successful autonomous schools also require a paradigm shift in the behaviour of leaders. Principals who are used to operating as administrative leaders, within a strong hierarchy, may lack the confidence to operate in a different way. During my August visit to Malaysia, I was struck by a news item in the New Straits Times. A principal was considering whether to allow students to use e-cigarettes on school premises and planned to seek guidelines from the Ministry of Education. There are two major leadership issues arising from this case. First, there is a clear moral issue. Should principals allow minors to imbibe a highly addictive drug on school premises? I am clear about the answer to this, as I hope you are. Second, there is an issue of leadership scope. Why does the principal need to seek guidelines on an issue which clearly requires a school-based decision? The answer is that some principals have become so dependent on the external bureaucracy that they fail to use even the limited discretion they currently enjoy. A change of mindset is required for potentially autonomous schools and leaders to overcome such timidity.

The Impact of School Leadership

As noted above, and in the Education Blueprint, the most important school-based factors influencing learner outcomes are classroom teaching and school leadership. The Blueprint states that an outstanding principal, focused on instructional, not administrative, leadership, can raise student outcomes by as much as 20%. The widely-cited research by Leithwood et al (2006) goes further, showing that 'total leadership accounted for a quite significant 27 per cent variation in student achievement across schools'. Robinson (2007) endorses the Blueprint's view about the importance of instructional leadership. Based on a meta-analysis of relevant research, she shows that the closer leaders are to classroom teaching and learning, the greater their impact on student outcomes. Leithwood et al (2010) also stress the importance of leaders engaging with families in order to address, rather than simply to accept, the socio-economic factors which often undermine learner progress.

Developing School Leaders

The Education Blueprint identifies the training and development implications of the reform agenda. This has a number of highly significant aspects:

- Aspiring principals will require the NPQEL.
- Soon-to-be-appointed principals will spend one month under the mentorship of the principal who will be leaving.
- They will also receive coaching and mentoring from an experienced principal or district School Improvement Partner (SIP).
- Existing principals will receive extra coaching if their schools under-perform.

These measures collectively suggest a comprehensive approach to the considerable training needs which inevitably arise from the Government's ambitious plans. It will also require a substantial increase in the capacity of the IAB, and of school districts.

Hallinger (2003: 342) notes that 'there has been an unprecedented global commitment among government agencies toward principal training', so the plans articulated in the Blueprint are consistent with good international practice. Hallinger (ibid) also stresses that 'the focus of much of this training is towards instructional leadership'. A programme to develop instructional leaders requires three fundamental elements:

- A strong and lasting focus on teaching and learning as the main purpose of schooling.
- Skills development to enable principals and other school leaders to model good practice and to monitor and evaluate classroom activities.
- A commitment to openness, dialogue and distributed leadership, recognising that expertise may be independent of formal hierarchies.

(Bush and Glover 2009)

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS EXCELLENT LEADERSHIP

The international research evidence, and the Malaysia Education Blueprint, both show that effective leadership is central to successful schooling. The Blueprint foreshadows a number of significant measures designed to transform learner outcomes. The international literature shows that principals require sufficient scope to enact leadership across a range of dimensions, and the Blueprint signals an important step in that direction. Just as important is a change of mind-set, so that principals are confident to exercise the powers they have now and are likely to acquire. Linked to this is the need for principals to encourage other leaders to use their own initiative to promote school improvement, notably in respect of instructional leadership, and not for them to seek prior approval for every change. Within and beyond schools, traditional 'top-down' leadership has to be modified to allow 'bottom-up' innovation and lateral decision-making. Developing current and aspiring principals and leaders to act in this way is the key to the success of the Government's ambitious reform agenda.

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