

LEADING IN DIVERSITY: A TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS

Cheah Chu Tai

Apin-Apin Secondary School, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This paper is a personal reflection of a Malaysian secondary school principal in two schools in Sabah, Malaysia. The author, Malaysian Chinese, held positions as school teacher and teacher trainer prior to school principal highlighted academic achievement in both schools using Malaysian public examinations – SPM and PMR as measures during her headship from 2007 through 2012. The first school, a predominantly Kadazan-Dusun community, was a large rural government day school with an enrolment of about 1500. The second school, with enrolment of about 1300, belongs to the “conforming school” or government aided school. This type of school serves primarily the Chinese community but over time, it is found to be quite diverse. The gain in SPM examination is 0.57 over four years in the first school and 0.68 in two years in the second school. The gain in PMR examination is 0.57 and 0.12 respectively.

Keywords: *school achievement, leadership in diversity, ‘conforming school’ or national type secondary school culture*

INTRODUCTION

I was a teachers’ trainer and school teacher for twenty over years before I became a school principal¹. My entry into school leadership became less apprehensive as many of my trained teachers are working almost everywhere and anywhere inclusive of the district education offices in Sabah. Understandably, I had a lot of catching up to do with the evolving school systems when I accepted the appointment in late 2003. In this paper I present my experience in two rural schools, each supported by academic achievement in two major public examinations – PMR and SPM from 2007 through 2012. -

School A: Our ‘New’ Principal

Let me name the first school as School A and the second school as School B. Both are classified as rural school in Sabah and had large enrolment and offered classes from Form 1 until Form 6, aged 13 to 19 years old.

School A, sprawling over 20 acres by Kadamaian river, located 17 km away from a town, north of the capital city of Sabah. The school was too far to receive garbage disposal service by the town council. Treated water was not available at that time and so the school was responsible for providing clean water. Fortunately, electricity supply

was quite consistent. I happily accepted the position at this location so as to end my three years headship at the remote interior school with level 1 hardship.

This school, existed since 1971, recorded 1450 enrolment and 340 boarders in 2010, serving mostly Kadazan-Dusun agrarian community. Over 90% of the students were Christians and the remainder was Muslim. In the same year, I had professional staff of 110 teachers, almost 25% increase compared to the beginning of my term. The good majority of the teachers were local Sabahan from nearby villages (96%) and the rest from other parts of Malaysia. I was the seventh and the second female principal. It was estimated that about half of the teachers had been trained in the local teachers training colleges, with about two thirds of these who had upgraded to degree level while on service. The rest were graduates from local universities. A few of them had master degree.

Prior to my headship, this school had garnered considerable reputation, apart from being the top school in the district. In 2005, this school secured eighth place in ‘Excellent Boarding Management’ competition at national level. This school was also the recipient of ‘School Greening’ award (SERASI) in 2004. In addition, this school was the unbeatable champion for ‘track and field’ in the district sport.

The Achievement of School A (2007-2010)

With this impressive achievement, I had to set a meaningful and inviting goal for this school. I located the rank of this school for 2006. I named this as the take-off-value TOV. It was 107th out 188 schools in Sabah. From here, I formulated some programs that elevated to rank 73rd in the first year (see Table 1) and achieving GPS value below 6 for the first time. It went on steadily until reaching the top quarter at rank 50th by the end of my third year term (Table 1). By NKRA (National Key Result Area) measure, this school ranked 913th out of 2198 which equaled to the top 41.5%. The PMR examination, however took a longer to yield reasonable result –below GPS 3 in 2010 (see Table 2).

Table 1: *Achievement of SPM Examination of School A (2006-2010)*

Year	2006 (TOV)	2007	2008	2009	2010
Percent pass*	87.8	96.6	94.3	99.6	99.2
School Grade Average (GPS)	6.34	5.95	5.77	5.57	5.77
Rank in Sabah	107 th / 188	73 rd	63 rd	50 th / 204	67 th

*Based on Malay Language Pass

Table 2: *Achievement of PMR Examination of School A (2006-2010)*

Year	2006 (TOV)	2007	2008	2009	2010
Percent pass	60.1	59.3	59.7	61.2	69.1
School Grade Average (GPS)	-- (not available)	3.19	3.14	2.99	2.83

DISCUSSIONS

The Chosen Measure

As I have explained in the previous section, teachers at this school were basking with numerous awards and quite comfortable being the top school in the district. Yet, they used passing percentage, a quantitative measure to report achievement and hardly understood the qualitative measure -School Grade Average (GPS). So I got hold of the ranking of all secondary schools in Sabah as the reference. In October 2007, I announced this as well as GPS to teachers. Later in late 2008, the idea of ranking of schools began nation-wide. In 2009, the school ranked 50th out of 204 schools in Sabah. This was achieved by improving the score of subject grade average (GPMP) for core subjects that in turn improved the School Grade Average (GPS).

The Transformative Tools

Knowing the rank was not enough, I quickly introduced effective tools to achieve better GPS. These tools were head count, analysis item and mastery learning. I realized that teachers were not impressed by better rank of my previous school because it was a small school. Head count was a recommended tool introduced by the State Education Department. A senior teacher here was already trained at this school. So I came to make it happen.

Apart from doing head count, I decided to introduce item analysis for the examination classes by the middle of 2007 after a hint from an officer from the State Education Department. Objectivity was important because I was constantly compared with the predecessor. I had to remove their doubts by referring to various official standards, circulars and professional circulars. Later, item analysis was made another official tool by the top (State Education department), but most of us simply filled up with numbers for others to see and hardly made sense or made use the data.

To promote and use those tools was a tough job. The process was painful but it was worthwhile when they saw the result within a year. For item analysis, I ensured that content areas were suitably analyzed, mastery of sub contents was reported and appropriate actions were taken by teachers. In this way, curricular weaknesses were exposed for change to happen. Ultimately, when they saw the fruits of their labor

in SPM examination in March 2008, more teachers became willing followers and accepted item analysis as a transformative tool (see Table 1 and 2).

Mentoring for Competency

In order to produce a considerable increase in GPS, I ensured that the core subjects improved qualitatively, not just in percent pass. The core subjects were the compulsory subjects for examination candidates. I wanted teachers to understand the value of subject grade average was the measure of quality, not just percent pass that they were used to. I personally mentored four of the seven core panel – Malay and English language, science and mathematics.

The Malay language panel was easy to mentor and the grade subject average improved tremendously within a year. For the English language panel, even though with extra attention from me, the improvement was dismal for three years. So in 2010, I resorted to making action research compulsory for all English Language teachers. Subsequently, they obtained insights and took appropriate actions that eventually led to improved grades. This eventually propelled PMR examination achievement in 2010 (Table 2). The science and mathematics panel improved steadily under my mentorship. This would deem to be unusual for a rural school when PPSMI policy was enforced. I listened to all other subjects / panels too and examined the practices and the ‘norms’. I offered my advice on considerations or changes needed to bring about students’ learning.

In the fourth year, I also ventured to nurture a few teachers’ leaders. One of them was Malay language teacher. I included a paragraph written by this teacher to illustrate the perception of my leadership in this school².

“The achievement in Malay language in PMR and SPM examinations from 2006 to 2009 strongly demonstrated that effort and programmes implemented were worthwhile in overcoming students’s weaknesses. This inspirational increase in achievement was the ideas from our leadership, the new principal, Madam Cheah Chu Tai since her headhsip in 2007. The mandate given and outpour of ideas were taken up by the Malay Language teachers and thus transformed teaching and learning of Malay language (October 2010)”.

SUMMARY

I was struck by the remark made by the teacher above that I was new principal even after nearly four years leading the school. I had to say I was not only leading a top school, I also inherited a debt ridden school. I rose above by taking corrective measures for the school finance management, raised the academic attainment to a higher level and maintained the ‘track and field’ record during my term.

I summarized my experience in School A with Peter Drucker's words: *Effective leader is not someone who is loved and admired. He/ She is someone whose followers do the right things. Popularity is not leadership. Results are.*"

School B: Up, Up and Away

The second school belonged to the Chinese or more accurately "conforming school". Historically, migrant Chinese and philanthropists built primary and secondary schools in 1950s in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak to serve their educational needs. In the seventies, some of these schools, due to shortness in funding or some other reasons, they opted to receive funding from the Ministry of Education. Hence, they are also known as government aided school. The school property is usually governed by a board whose memberships are philanthropists and advocates for Chinese education. They aspire to propagate Chinese cultural legacies through education.

School B is categorized as rural school even though it is located only a few kilometers away from the town. Built in the 1971, this school not only becomes the choice for the Chinese community, it also attracts many non Chinese parents. To illustrate the diversity, this school recorded 77.4% Chinese students and 22.6% non Chinese out of a total of 1303 students in February 2012. These Chinese students are further divided into "pure" Chinese origin – that means both parents are Malaysian Chinese and "inter-married" Chinese- that is the mother who might be a local non Chinese or an alien such as Indonesian or Filipinos. The "pure" Chinese made up of just under a third (29.5%) while the inter-married ones made up of 47.9%. The teaching staffs of Chinese origin did not grow proportionately with the enrolment, much to the dismay of the Board. In fact, School B had only a quarter or 25% of teaching staffs who are conversant in Chinese.

After seven years of leading in government secondary schools, I could feel the difference – the ethos of Chinese school immediately when I checked in March 2011. This was because the senior teachers, made up of about 40%, efficiently coached the junior teachers into Chinese school work culture. The remainder of the teachers was made up of 29% beginning teachers and 31% of teachers with three to five years of experience. Initially, I was bewildered with students with Chinese names but hardly looked Chinese because they were children of intermarriages. The pure Chinese parents, comprised about a third, often exercised fully their right as clients and thus contributed to the overall 'efficient' and 'responsive' Chinese school. With a professional staff of a quarter of Chinese and the rest non Chinese, I brought this top school to yet another level.

The Achievement of School B (2011-2012)

School B received “The Promising School” award for state level in 2006. The aura of this award still prevailed. Academic achievement was quite well maintained even though teachers’ turn over seemed to be high – a little more than 10%. Junior teachers were quite productive, appropriately inducted under a capable senior assistant. This school was often under staffed but usually overcome with a fine spirit of camaraderie among teachers.

All school programs were neatly in place by the time I arrived in March 2011. There was very little room left for improvement. However, I managed to squeeze in a reward system for learning, emphasizing mastery learning and I fine-tuned head count. Using weekly professional briefing, the followership came on board with me. The sum of all existing practices (which were beyond the scope of this paper) and added strategic actions resulted in significant academic attainment by 2012.

From Table 3, SPM examination in 2011 made a gain in GPS of 0.54 and crossed over to a value below 5. This was historical for this school. Similarly, I brought about a value crossing gain in SPM in School A – from GPS value 6 to value 5, but the gain was 0.39 (Table 1). Meanwhile, PMR examination also yielded qualitative and quantitative gain, much to my delight. The teachers had gladly documented their reflections in a compilation³. I gave my take on this unprecedented attainment in the following section.

Table 3: *Achievement of SPM Examination of School B (2009-2012)*

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012
Percent pass (%)*	86.2	89.84	85.4	89.0
School Grade Average (GPS)	5.52	5.50	4.96	4.82

**Based on Malay Language pass*

Table 4: *Achievement of PMR Examination of School B (2009-2012)*

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012
Number of Candidates	244	253	236	259
Percent pass (%)	74.59	67.19	73.72	78.76
School Grade Average (GPS)	2.80	2.84	2.78	2.72

DISCUSSIONS

Undo the Tradition

When I took over the school, some of the well-meaning programs such as extra or tuition classes for candidates of SPM and PMR examinations were already in place. The main purpose was to complete the syllabi of examination subjects to make way for revision. Parents were willing to pay tuition fees but the students were not willing to stay longer at school. Two months into my headship, I conducted a survey for the students to ascertain this. I presented the findings to teachers.

Subsequently, the time-table committee worked out an alternative way to complete the syllabi without having the tuition or extra class in 2012 – much to the delight of students and teachers too. The students said that they could have more time for revision at night after their own personal tuition classes in the afternoon.

Engaging the Disengaged

After listening carefully to teachers, we started define disengaged students and included this in the school's strategic planning. It was defined as students who slept during class right in front of the teachers during the early morning hours of school. The indicator was the number of test script or examination script that was deliberately not answered by the student. It was estimated 6% of the students was in this category.

In general, I believe majority of the parents who chose this school are themselves truly engaged in their children's education. But it was not a secret that many teachers who stay on to teach in this school were the ones that survived the demanding culture of the clients. To help teachers, I enlightened them about the nature of our students-the internet generations and their needs. From here, teachers were willingly to use electronic equipment to hold their attention. I went on to suggest engaging students through the social media -“facebook”. They were game to try.

I attempted to engage the parents through Parent Teacher Association but the attendance during the annual meetings were often dismal, as usual. I managed to speak to parents on transcript giving day in 2011 with a historical turn out. I stopped engaging the parents in my second year. The challenge still remained: disengaged students were extremely weak in Malay Language and History. Their parents were unable to control their life style and influence their attitude. To lessen the cultural shock, I gave special briefing to prepare new and relief teachers on handling this.

The Ultimate Carrot

To enhance students' learning, I used the per capital grant available since the procurement of teaching aids was nearly met in 2011. The cash incentive, RM5 each, was a reward

for all those students who achieved their targeted grades in the head count. This would mean that a very weak student with a “failed” target grade might be a recipient. This idea was not agreeable by some teachers but we went ahead as I genuinely wanted to reward for their effort in academic and elicit some behavioral changes.

In the first year for the first phase, we ended up paying nearly eight thousand ringgit from the per capital grant. The school went into a festive mood. The teachers happily organized a ceremony to witness each recipient picking up their reward on stage. The purpose was to celebrate the least celebrate - the average and below students. I extended invitations to those parents of ‘disengaged’ students but they did not show up. This incentive was repeated in 2012 for all examinations classes. I also extended to critical subjects such as Malay language and History in preparation for public examinations.

SUMMARY

The atmosphere of this school was always intense but the morale was good. Academic achievement rose steadily in 2012 in spite of losing three senior assistants –both on promotion and on transfer between November 2011 and in early 2012. I had to make do by roping in existing senior staff until many months later. Thankfully, they were all capable of sustaining the momentum. I enjoyed my term here overall.

CONCLUSIONS

It is important for leader to set directions. It is equally important for the followership to make school improvement happen. I had my share of experience in two different schools – willing teachers and strategic actions go a long way.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Notes:

1. My education background: I had primary education in Chinese primary school and secondary education at a Chinese secondary school from 1970 -1976. I graduated with a degree in applied chemistry from United Kingdom in 1982 and obtained Diploma in Education in 1983 at Malaya University, Malaysia. I joined Ministry of Education as trained teacher in 1984. I completed Masters in Science Education in 1993. I received “Pengetua Cemerlang” award in March 2011.

2. The original quote in Malay from Teacher A - *“Pencapaian Bahasa Melayu PMR dan SPM SMK Narinang sejak 2006 hingga 2009 sangat memberikan gambaran yang positif bahawa usaha/program yang telah dilaksanakan berbaloi/berjaya mengatasi kelemahan pelajar. Peningkatan pencapaian yang sangat memberangsangkan ini adalah cetusan idea dari kepimpinan pengetua SMK.XXX yang baharu iaitu Madam Cheah Chu Tai sejak mula memimpin sekolah ini pada tahun 2007. Cetusan idea dan mandat yang diamanahkan kepada guru Bahasa Melayu digalas oleh guru-guru Bahasa Melayu SMK.XXX dan telah ditranformasi dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran Bahasa Melayu.” (Okt 2010).*
3. The compilation was named “Revolusi Akademik (REVKA) – Sorotan Pengalaman Analisis dan Program Peningkatan Akademik PMR dan SPM 2011”, published in 2012.