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Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Roles in Facilitating Learning Organization in Selected Primary Schools in Malaysia: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine headmasters and headmistresses' roles in facilitating learning organization and their perceptions of transformational leadership in primary schools. The study also examined the relationship between the headmasters' and headmistresses' perceptions of transformational leadership and their roles in facilitating learning organization. A survey method was used to collect data from 41 headmasters and headmistresses who were pursuing Bachelor degree programme in Educational Management. Organizational learning questionnaire developed by Silins, Zarins and Mulford (2002) was used to measure the roles of headmasters and headmistresses in facilitating learning organization, while transformational leadership questionnaire developed by Leithwood and Jantzi (1996, 1997) was used to assess leadership. Means and Pearson product correlations were used to analyze the data. Major results of this study showed that headmasters and headmistresses have high perceptions of learning organization and transformation leadership. Overall, transformational leadership indicated high and significant correlation with overall learning organization. Each dimension of transformational leadership indicated high and significant correlation with overall learning organization. Further, almost all dimensions of leadership showed significant correlations with dimensions of learning organization.

Introduction

The arrival of the 21st Century has endorsed the fact that change is inevitable and inescapable. Change permeates into every imaginable human activity including education. In particular, educational reforms may take many forms including introducing cutting-edge technologies, new approaches in teaching and learning, new school charters, and governance and curriculum revision in schools. All these changes are global phenomena and what differentiates one country from another is how receptive they are to the changes. Changes in schools have brought with them challenges, especially for school leadership and teachers. To adopt education reforms with these challenges, it is imperative for educational leaders to embrace and apply the

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss about teachers and headmistresses perceptions of their roles in facilitating learning organization in primary schools.

Learning Organization in Schools

During this period of more growing volatile changes, the learning organization (LO) concept has been increasingly accepted in various organizations for its capacity of providing employees with tools that can help them solve problems to the best of their abilities and for the best of organizations (Larsen, McInerney, Nyquist, Silsbee, & Zagonel, 2002). The concept of learning organization has also been accepted for its unlimited capacity of enabling organizations to meet the ever-changing needs of the clients and environment. Silins, Zarins and Mulford (2002) support the idea that schools must become learning organizations to meet the challenges of the future. The concept of learning organization gained widely acceptance among researchers since Senge's (1994) inception of his five theoretical dimensions of the construct. Senge's dimensions of learning organizations are personal mastery, systems thinking, shared mental models, team based learning and building shared vision. However, whether the concept of learning organization is well-received by school and its leadership cross cultures is not clear as several researchers hold different views on the issue. For instance, Alavi and MacCormick (2004) urged that the applicability of learning organization in schools depends on the cultural backgrounds of the schools. They further argued that although various researchers have suggested extending the concept of learning organization in schools and that it may improve the effectiveness of the schools, the researchers, however, raised that some aspects of the construct may encounter various difficulties in some school cultures. In addition to that, there are some research findings describe that some management environments in schools are not conducive to learning development. For instance, Seymour & Arnott (1998) concluded in their findings that schools were not good organizations for supporting and developing the adults who work within+(p.28)

Furthermore, it has been raised that the literature of learning organization on schools is lagging behind of empirical studies which could show the acceptability and applicability of the concept in school organizations. For instance, Silins, Zarins and Mulford (2002) after reviewing the literature on learning organization indicated that there is still scarcity of systematic research on the construct in the school organizations. Recently, Hayes, Christie, Mills and Lingard (2004) also suggested that more empirical research is required to examine the contribution of learning organization to school organizations.

On the other aspect, studies on schools as learning organization have identified different characteristics of learning schools. For instance, Johnson (1998) identified four characteristics of school as a learning organization: the existence of inclusive collaborative structures, effective communication channels, integrated professional developmental programs, and learning-focused leadership. Leithwood, Leonard, and Sharratt (1998) found that conditions that foster learning organizations for elementary and secondary schools are similar. They are: school culture, structure, resources and leadership. Silins, Zarins and Mulford (2002) initially conceptualized seven characteristics of learning organizations in schools. These were environmental scanning, vision and goals, collaboration, taking initiatives and risks, review, recognition and reinforcement and continuing professional development. However, after collecting data, the Silins, Zarins and Mulford found that the results fit only four factors of learning organization: Trusting and collaborative climate, taking initiatives and risks, shared and monitored mission and professional development.

previous research show that there are no conclusive organization in schools. Moreover, the issue of learning organization in schools has raised various questions including the role and kind of leadership that can effectively foster it.

Roles of School Leadership in Learning Organization

In meeting the educational objectives of the 21st century, the role of school leadership should change to enhance and develop school capacity through becoming learning organization. In this regards, a school leader plays an important role in facilitating teachersqprofessional development in schools. As a manager of a school, the school leader should have power and capacity to create a conducive environment for teachers to participate in the professional development. Teachers need professional support like budgets and release time from principals. Harnessing appropriate strategies and directions of teacher professional development in schools should be at the heart of the school leadersqresponsibilities.

Griffin (1987) calls for principals to give priority to school administration and the process of teaching and learning in school. The function of school leadership is not only confined to planning, controlling and evaluating, but it also requires the principal to lead the teachers in terms of how to improve the quality of teaching and the performance of the school. The direction of learning in school will be determined through cooperation between principals, teachers and other educational administrators. This can be achieved when school principals assume the roles of school leaders.

Clement and Vandenberghe (2001) conducted a study about the ways in which school leaders can enhance teacher professional development in school settings. In their study they employed semi-structured interviews and case studies. The findings from this study suggested that the contribution of school leaders to teacher professional development can be divided into three patterns; (a) some teachers view school leadersq roles in teacher professional development as unsatisfactory and the school climate does not support their learning, (b) a group of teachers perceived that school leaders and colleagues play an important role in supporting teacher professional development by creating a conducive learning environment for teachers to participate in in-service training and self-directed teacher professional development, (c) another group of teachers viewed the school climate as a stimulus for their learning by creating a collaborative culture among teachers in school. The findings of Clement and Vandenbergheqstudy indicate that leadership is one of the factors that may contribute to the effectiveness of professional development activities in schools. The school leader plays an important role in promoting and enhancing continuous professional development. This leads one to believe that the process of introducing new professional learning that stresses the notion of criticality and reflectivity of inquiry necessitates effective leadership to inspire, motivate and support teachersq engagement in high quality professional development.

It should be conveyed that creating learning organization is not achieved merely through traditional human resource or staff professional development, formal training. Creating learning organization needs purposive initiatives of leaders. Creating learning organization depends on leaders who hold power or have influence in organization (Johnson, 2002). Leadersq effort in choosing strategic activities is believed to have capacity of building a learning organization. Moreover, Rowley (1998) is of the opinion that creating learning organization depends upon embedding learning in the management processes of the organization. In the opinion of Senge (1990), leaders require to adopt

learning organizations. In short, learning organization will
school leadership embraces it as its role.
A great deal has been written about leadership in schools. Fullan (2001)
suggested leadership practices should be linked to facilitate learning organization.
However, a kind of leadership that is effective for creating or nurturing a learning
organization is still under debate as the issue has received little empirical attention
among researchers. Literature shows that there are some general recommendations that
require more investment of efforts to organize them theoretically before examining them
empirically. For instance, Diggins (1997) supported the idea of De Craner Jr (1996) who
proposed that a constitutional model of leadership is a worth promise to create a learning
organization in schools. Through constitutional model of leadership, leaders of learning
organization should possess character, vision, behaviour and confidence of maintaining,
developing, and promoting human capital of individuals to learn (Diggins, 1997). However,
the suggestion of Diggins was not empirically examined to find its contribution in creating
a learning organization in schools.

Johnson (1998, 2002) proposed a leadership model for a learning organization
which ascertained that three qualities are essential for the model. The three qualities are
visioning, empowerment and leading-learning. Johnson argued that for the leadership
model to work, the three qualities need to be blended in different stages of building a
learning organization. Although the model provides an intriguing conceptual promise
relation but until now has not received a considerable empirical examination.

Another model of leadership that has been proposed that can help create a
learning organization in schools is transformational leadership as the model is anticipated
to transform individuals in the organization (Leithwood et al. 1999; Davis, Ellett, &
Annunziata, 2003; Mulford, 2003). In this model, Leithwood et al. (1999) argued that
school leaders who practice transformational leadership are more successful in creating
conducive learning opportunities in schools. In a study conducted by Mulford and Sillins
(2001) the results clearly showed that the best leadership for learning organization is the
principal with transformational leadership skills which focus on individual support, culture,
structure, vision and goals, performance expectation and intellectual stimulation (Mulford,
2003). In this perspective, the transformational leaders are not only good at managing
the school but also able to lead and inspire the teachers to be autonomous learners.
Based on the transformational leadership, one can argue that autonomous learning
necessitates inspirations, motivation, direction and full commitment from principals and
administrators. In other words, the principals and other school administrators should give
priority to teacher learning as well as children learning in order to create a learning school.

The results of qualitative and quantitative studies on secondary schools show that
transformational leadership promote learning organization conditions (Leithwood,
Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998; Silins, Mulford, Zarins, & Bishop, 2004). In the three
qualitative studies in Canada, Leithwood, Leonard, and Sharratt (1998) found that
teachers ranked leadership the first variable across the studies to have indirect effects in
schools as learning organizations. When leadership was examined to have direct
influence on learning organization, the findings indicated that teacher ranked it among the
three least variables from nine variables. For the quantitative study in Australian
secondary schools, the findings show that school principals with transformational
leadership style are good promoters of learning organizations among schools, which
accounted for 25% of the variance (Silins, Mulford, Zarins, & Bishop, 2004). The main
constructs of transformational leadership used in these studies mainly focus on visions
and goals, structure, intellectual stimulation, individual support, and performance
expectation.

behaviours and attitudes among principals and headmasters/headmistresses and the culture of teachers' learning in schools. The demands of autonomous learning in a time of change require the school leaders place equal emphasis on teacher learning and student learning which can be achieved through transformational leadership. For this to happen, school leaders, such as principals and headmasters should embrace role of transformational leaders to facilitate learning of teachers to carry out the transformation of their schools to learning organizations accordingly. To achieve this consistently, school leaders should play a big role in fostering a culture of learning organization in their schools.

Objectives of the Study

This study focused on three main objectives. The first objective was to explore headmasters/headmistresses' roles in facilitating learning organization in Malaysian primary schools. To examine headmasters/headmistresses' perceptions of transformational leadership in primary schools was the second objective. Finally, the study examined the relationship between the headmaster/headmistress level of transformational leadership and their perceptions of learning organization.

Methodology

This preliminary research used a survey design in investigating how headmasters and headmistresses perceived their roles in facilitating learning organization in primary schools in Malaysian primary schools.

Instruments

This study employed a questionnaire for data collection. The questionnaire contained three main parts. The first part sought demographic information of the participants. The second part was learning organization and the third was transformational leadership. For the learning organization, the study used a questionnaire of organization learning developed by Silins, Zarins and Mulford (2002). This instrument has 40 items that covers four major areas: trusting and collaboration, taking initiatives and risk, shared and monitored mission, and professional development. To measure the transformational leadership, the study employed the instrument developed by Leithwood and Jantzi (1996, 1997); Leithwood and Duke (1999). The instrument contains 48 items that involve seven dimensions: identifies and articulates a vision/inspiration, provides appropriate model, fosters the acceptance of group goals (6), provides individualized support, holds high performance expectations, provides intellectual stimulation, transactional leadership: contingent rewards. Both questionnaires were modified to suit the respondents of the study.

Respondents' Background

Participants for this study were 41 in-service headmasters and headmistresses who were pursuing Bachelor degree of Educational Management at the Institute of Education in the International Islamic University Malaysia. Demographic characteristics of the respondents are reported in Table 1. Of the respondents, 63.4% were female and 36.6% were male. Their age started with 41 years, of which the majority of them were between 46-50 years and only 12.8% were between 41-45 years. The ethnic compositions of the respondents were Malays (68.3%), Indians (17.1%) and Chinese

cept one who did mention his/her position, were Most of the respondents (68.3%) indicated that they had 16-25 year experience of working with schools, whereas 26.8% of them indicated to have more than 25 years in schools. The most typical years in the current position of the respondents were between 6-15 years (61%), while only 39% of the respondents were holding the current position in between 1-5 years. Locations of the schools were almost equally distributed between urban and rural. The respondents reported that 51.2% of them were from urban and 48.8% were from rural schools.

Table 1: Demographic Background of the Respondents

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	15	36.6
Female	26	63.4
Age		
41-45 years	5	12.2
46-50 years	36	88.8
Ethnic group		
Malay	28	68.3
Chinese	6	14.6
Indian	7	17.1
Others	0	0
Current Position		
Headmasters/headmistresses	40	97.6
No Answer	1	2.4
Experience work with schools		
<6 years	2	4.9
6-15 years	0	0
16-25 years	28	68.3
>25 years	11	26.8
Years in the current position		
1-5 years	16	39.0
6-10 years	19	46.4
11-15 years	6	14.6
School location		
Rural	20	48.8
Urban	21	51.2

N=41

Results

The results of this study are presented into two main phases. The first phase is about perceptions of headmasters and headmistresses of their roles in facilitating learning organization. The second phase is an examination of the relationship between learning organization and transformational leadership.

Respondents' Perceptions of Roles in Facilitating Learning Organization

Table 2 reports the results of means, standard deviations and alpha reliabilities for all scales measuring the four dimensions of learning organization and six dimensions of transformational leadership as perceived by headmasters/headmistresses. High mean scores (close to 5) in the learning organization suggested that headmasters and headmistresses' perceptions were high in believing their roles in facilitating learning organization in schools. An overall mean score of headmaster/headmistresses' perceptions was 4.17 on a five-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree); and the standard deviation was 0.33. Reliability for the learning organization, as a whole, was 0.93. Mean ratings of learning organization dimensions ranged from 4.27 (sharing and monitored mission) to 4.01 (taking initiatives and risks) standard deviations of responses in the learning organization dimensions ranged from 0.31 to 0.35). Reliabilities for sub-scales of learning organizations were within acceptable range (0.64 to 0.85) for a preliminary study. As the results in Table 2 show, the mean scores across the dimensions of learning organization were nearly consistent. It can be seen from the mean scores that the degree of headmasters/headmistresses' perceptions of their roles in facilitating learning organization were all high.

Respondents' Perceptions of transformational leadership

In the transformational leadership, high mean scores (close to 6) suggested that headmasters and headmistresses believed that they practiced such kind of leadership in their schools. The results show that an overall mean score of headmasters and headmistresses' perceptions of the transformational leadership was 5.17 and standard deviation was 0.43 (Table 2). Reliability Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the transformational leadership questionnaire, as a whole, was very high (0.97). Mean ratings of the transformational leadership dimensions ranged from 5.32 (leadership that fosters group goals) to 5.04 (leadership that provides intellectual stimulation) on a six-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 6 strongly agree). The standard deviations ranged from 0.73 to 0.41. All sub-scale reliabilities for leadership dimensions seemed to be at the very acceptable levels (0.62 to 0.90) in view that this study was at a very preliminary stage. These results reveal that the variations of mean scores in the scales of transformational leadership were very close, whereas the degree of the mean scores could be judged that was high.

Organization and transformation leadership dimensions

Variables	Number of items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Reliability Cronbach's Alpha
Overall Learning Organization	40	4.17	0.31	0.93
Trusting and collaborative climate	14	4.18	0.35	0.85
Taking initiatives and risks	7	4.01	0.38	0.64
Shared and monitored mission	9	4.27	0.38	0.82
Professional development	10	4.15	0.36	0.71
Overall Transformational Leadership	48	5.17	0.43	0.97
Provides vision/inspiration	10	5.14	0.47	0.87
Provides appropriate Model	3	5.16	0.48	0.73
Fosters group goals	6	5.32	0.41	0.80
Provides support	9	5.20	0.44	0.88
High performance expectations	3	5.07	0.73	0.62
Provides intellectual stimulation	9	5.04	0.57	0.90
Transactional leadership: Contingent rewards	8	5.24	0.55	0.86

N=41

Relationship between Transformational Leadership and Learning Organization

Table 3 presents the results of Pearson-product correlations between transformation leadership and learning organization. Firstly, overall correlation between transformational leadership and overall learning organization was examined. Secondly, the relationship between each dimension of transformational leadership and the overall learning organization was presented. Finally, correlations between measures of each dimension of transformational leadership and dimensions of learning organization were examined. Significant and strong correlations suggested the degree of headmasters and headmistresses' transformational leadership in facilitating learning organization in their schools.

Closely examination of the results, an overall measure of transformational leadership strongly and significantly correlated with an overall measure of learning organization ($r=0.65$, $p < 0.01$). The results indicate that the overall measure of transformational leadership strongly and significantly correlated with each dimension of learning organization, most strongly with trusting and collaborative climate ($r=0.61$, $p < 0.01$).

development ($r=0.56, p<0.01$), shared and monitored most strongly with taking initiatives and risks ($r=0.47,$

Each dimension of the transformational leadership significantly and strongly related to overall measure of the learning organization (Table 3). The strongest relationship was between the overall learning organization and the transformational leadership that provides intellectual stimulation ($r=0.63, p<0.01$), whereas the least relationship was with the transformational leadership that provides appropriate model ($r=0.35, p<0.01$).

The correlations between the dimensions of the transformational leadership and the dimensions of learning organization somewhat vary from no significance to significance. Only two dimensions of the leadership, i.e. providing appropriate model and holding high performance expectations, did not show significant relationships with some dimensions of learning organization. The transformational leadership that provides appropriate model significantly and moderately correlated only with one dimension of the learning organization (professional development, $r=0.42, p<0.01$). For the transformational leadership that holds high performance expectations significantly related with all dimensions of the learning organization except with taking initiatives and risks. The remaining five dimensions of the transformational leadership indicated significant relationship with all four dimensions of the learning organization. The strongest relationship was evident between leadership that provides support and professional development ($r=0.58, p<0.01$); and between transactional leadership and trusting and collaborating climate ($r=0.58, p<0.01$). The least relationship of the five dimensions of transformational leadership was between taking initiatives and risks and each of providing vision/inspiration ($r=0.40, p<0.01$) and transactional leadership ($r=0.40, p<0.01$)

Table 3: Correlations between transformational leadership and learning organization

Variable	Trusting and collaborative climate	Taking initiatives and risks	Shared and monitored mission	Professional development	Overall learning organization
Provides vision/inspiration	0.57**	0.40**	0.43**	0.52**	0.57**
Provides appropriate Model	0.25	0.25	0.31	0.42**	0.35**
Fosters group goals	0.51**	0.34*	0.51**	0.53**	0.56**
Provides support	0.54**	0.40*	0.50**	0.58**	0.58**
High performance expectations	0.44**	0.21	0.54**	0.54**	0.48**
Provides intellectual stimulation	0.55**	0.55**	0.55**	0.53**	0.63**
Transactional leadership: Contingent rewards	0.58**	0.40*	0.43**	0.43**	0.53**
Overall transformational leadership	0.61**	0.47**	0.55**	0.56**	0.65**

** $p<0.01$

* $p<0.05$

ssion and implications

study was to investigate the perceptions of school learning organization and their perceptions of transformational leadership practices. Headmasters and headmistresses as school leaders indicated high perceptions of roles in facilitating learning organization. They also showed high perceptions of transformational leadership practices. These results suggested that headmasters and headmistresses have positive views about the concept of learning organization and transformational leadership in the context of primary schools. As the constructs of learning organization and transformational leadership have been related to changes in school organizations (Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997), the preliminary results of this study show that headmasters and headmistresses possess positive perceptions of facilitating changes. Fullan (2001) argued that the process of introducing and implementing changes is complex; it requires high commitment from school leaders to inspire teachers to embark in continuous learning and professional development in order to support the process of implementing changes in schools to positive directions. In other words, headmasters and headmistresses positive receptivity of learning organization in schools might help them create conducive learning environment and learning opportunities, whereby every individual staff in school will be able to equip him/herself with necessary knowledge and skills pertinent with the implementation of changes.

Results of this study primarily substantiate the initial anticipation about the relationship of transformational leadership to learning organization. The results also provide initial information regarding the leadership practices that school leaders associated with learning organization in primary schools in Malaysia. These results support findings of the previous researchers (Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998, 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997) that show the transformational leadership is appropriate for a school reform which calls for adopting learning organization for school leaders and teachers. However, as the results are from the preliminary study, the researchers do not claim for any prediction of transformational leadership to learning organization.

One possible implications of the study is headmasters in this study have on the whole awareness of learning organization and operate at high levels of trusting and collaboration, taking initiatives and risk, shared and monitored mission, and professional development respectively.

The merits of these results add on the empirical evidence of learning organization in schools of which many researchers have indicated its scarcity. Although these results suggest that most dimensions of transformational leadership correlate with dimensions of learning organization. However, these results should be taken with cautions as some dimensions of transformation leadership did not significantly correlate with some dimensions of learning organization.

Limitations of the study

These results are based on self-rated responses of respondents of both their roles in facilitating learning organization and practices of transformational leadership. The respondents of self-rated measures have tendency of rating themselves higher. Therefore, the future study should examine teachers responses regarding their leaders in the same issues. Furthermore, the results of this study do not claim for any generalizations at this stage. As a preliminary study and the sample was not chosen based on probability sampling the results are strictly confined with the participants under the study.

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